



Cold Sands (Beyond the Iron Pines)

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[ENG TRAN] 漠上寒沙 BY 牧云岚卿

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Furthermore, this story contains homosexual relationships and adult content. Reader's discretion is advised. 此故事原作为网络小说家牧云岚卿所作。作者随抄袭风波而退隐江湖，至今毫无音讯。此作的英文翻译纯属本人个人兴趣，无意贩卖盈利。此外，此作含有同性恋爱情与成人内容，请读者注意。

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Cold Sands

✿ (Beyond the Frenz Dunes) ✿

Me Yun Lan Qing



Synopsis

 He was only a low-ranking deputy general and he was a prince. They met on the battlefield but it turned out to be the beginning of a complicated and beautiful story.

Murong Yu was a very confident man—until he met Han Xin.
There was naught he could not get; there was naught he could not destroy.
To let live or not, was all up to him.
He was the future ruler of Great Yan thus it is only natural that the world should bow down at his feet.
However, he had never thought that one day he would lose control of it.
That even his own will would be uncontrollable.
Murong Yu could neither get nor destroy this prisoner of war.

Han Xin had never given a care about the world—until he met Murong Yu.
He had never cared about anyone, nor had anyone cared about him.
It did not matter if he was alone or sad, as long as he could still laugh, life would go on.
He had learned long ago how not to question, how not to believe, how not to lose and how not to care.
Destiny's uncaring teasing and humiliations had already become numb to him.
That's right, he did not have a care in the world.
Even if it was this Crown Prince of Great Yan who had started to warm up to him.

This is my magnificent summary. Okay, I admit I can't write summaries. I mean it's so boring!

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Prologue

he Fifteenth Year of Rule of Emperor Rui Wen⁰ of Great Rui. Murong, the ruling clan of Great Yan in the north, attacked and initiated a war. Lin, the ruling clan of Great Rui, had never put an emphasis on military and so, with a weaker army, the Great Rui troops were pushed south until the South Hill Pass that served as the last line of defense to the Great Rui capital. The last fatal battle seemed imminent.

⁰ 瑞文 (*ruì4 wén2*), literally ‘auspicious literature’.

I: Prisoner

I waken from excruciating pain.

I open my eyes; it's still the same-old roof beam. There's a small window on one side and the sky that shows through it is split into fragments by metal bars. A few streams of light meanders in through the windows but still, it's oddly dark inside the prison cell.

I try to loosen up a bit, but the slightest tug sends unbearable pain down my back. Hissing out, I fall back limply onto the moldy hay and stare at the beam. Rats and cockroaches skitter around me. I glance at them, heave a big sigh and close my eyes again.

If it weren't for the injuries, I'd say this place is actually a bit better than the gloomy log shed at Uncle's house.

There are few drafts in here, but it's still chilling to the bones. I shiver slightly because the clothes that were ripped apart by whips do nothing to stop the icy air. After struggling to lift up my head, I realise a thin layer of ice had formed on me and is cracking into little bits along with my shivering.

There's no way of telling the time in this cell, but I'd say it's morning, judging from the light coming through the windows.

It hurts everywhere as if I've been ripped into witty-bitty pieces. It feels like my back's been skinned alive. Even the shallowest breath tugs at the wounds, making me jerk painfully. I inhale a breath of chilly air and stay motionless, watching calmly as the golden rays shine through bit by bit between the bars and scatter across the wall into tiny bright spots.

I've been captured for more than ten days already, and it's either been torturous interrogation or this dank prison cell, accompanied by hoards of critters, cold moldy food and freezing sleepless nights.

Oh, Empress Dowager, your holy grace which governs our nation with its irreplaceable excellence and the weight of the responsibility of our people rests safely within your hands. Not even the ever flowing river can be compared to the respect and admiration I have toward Your Graciousness. So, Your Graciousness, why the hell did you stick me into the army and slap the title of Deputy General on me when Your Graciousness clearly knows that I am one who does more harm

than good? Now you've done it, Your Graciousness. I've been captured in a blunder and imprisoned by the Yan troops without even having the tiniest taste of victory.

I would've been fine to just be an average prisoner, but I just had to be the Deputy General who serves under the General! The Yan officers looked as though they got a free lunch, beating me every day in hopes to get information about the Rui army defense tactics. Oh, Empress Dowager, Your Graciousness, please tell me how I could possibly know anything about such important military secrets when General Zhou doesn't even bother looking me in the eye.

There might not even be any bones left for you to bury after a fortnight of this if Your Graciousness doesn't come bust me out soon.

It takes all my efforts to tilt my head to one side. I open my eyes slightly and see a torch burning weakly between thick wooden posts, as if its fuel's all gone. That's exactly what I am, I smile bitterly. I lost both my parents young and none of my relatives care for me, not my grandmother, not my uncle. Then I get thrown onto the battlefield against my will, and now I think I'm half dead because of the interrogation.

How the hell should a soldier who hasn't earned his stripes know about some defense plan?

Heavy footsteps stop my thoughts, and shortly two bulky prison guards appear in front of me. The one in front with a beard and moustache frowns and takes a few steps towards the cell.

"Wake the fuck up, you! Your fake sleep don't fool me," he barks while beating a wooden stick on the steel lock.

I stay still on the moist ground as if I haven't heard a thing, not even batting an eyelash. I don't want to speak but even if I wanted to, I couldn't. Suddenly, I'm lifted up by the collar of what's left of my shirt. Caught off guard, I struggle a little and the wounds on my back all rip open instantly, but I still smile disdainfully even though it's so painful that my muscles start jerking.

"Don't worry. We won't let you die that easily!"

The guard in front of me looks angry as he rips my battle robe off my shoulder.

"Our general asks you one more time: are you going to cooperate with us or not?" he demands.

I shrug and tilt my head away from the foul odour coming from his mouth.

"I've answered that question already. Doesn't your general have anything better to do?" I retort.

The other guard takes a step closer and scoffs, "There's a saying from your country: 'A wise man does not fight when odds are against him.' Our army is shredding through your defenses. Not to mention our emperor is a wise emperor that I bet we won't find in your country and His Majesty will find it in his noble heart to forgive your past deeds. What're you still waiting for?"

I chuckle. "We also have a saying that goes: 'The fate of the country depends on every single citizen.' I might not have made any major contributions but I still have my dignity and pride. Whatever you've got for me, just bring it on."

"This idiot doesn't know how to appreciate our offerings," the guard in front of me spits at me. "The latest report says that the vanguards have already broken through the South Hill Pass and it won't be long before they reach the capital city of Rui! Even with your stupid loyalty, your Great Rui isn't doing so well."

“Well isn’t that strange,” I sneer, “if the Yan army could break through South Hill Pass then why would you need me to tell you Great Rui’s defense plans around the Rope Hill Creek area?”

I glance up in time to see uneasiness flash across their eyes but in a blink of an eye I’m violently dragged up again. The wounds on my back are killing me.

“What do we do if he doesn’t cave soon? His Highness, the crown prince is arriving soon!” Beardy mutters to the other.

The latter’s eyebrows are scrunched into a knot, eyes darting between me and Beardy. All of a sudden a playful look appears on his face.

He says leisurely, “Hey, isn’t it sandstorm season right now?”

Beardy remains still for a second, then turns around and snickers at me, “You piece of shit, that whipping last week is by far one of the nicer treatments you’ll get. You seem like the strong brave type so how about we go for a lil’ trip?”

I’m being dragged out of the prison before I realise it but I force myself to not show any sign of fear even though my legs are spaghetti.

The blazing afternoon sun roasts the desert, fighting through layers of flying sand. Someone pushes me down to the burning ground and cuffs my hands and feet. One end is attached to an iron pole. Someone pats me on my head and leaves with a sneer.

The sun beats down on me with nothing in its way and makes me feel like a kabob left to cook on bright red coals. The rays are like golden needles, stinging my body without any restraint. A grinding wave of pain bombards my senses, lighting my insides on fire. Sweat drips down my skin and a salty tang enters my mouth.

The weather on the deserts changes erratically. It might be a beautiful sunny day, hot as hell, and the next moment it might become a mess of a sandstorm, sand and rocks blown up to hit you smack on your pretty little face. Not to mention it’ll rub into your freshly-scabbed wounds, making you writhe in unspeakable pain.

Mouth drier than the desert, body on fire, wounds about to rip open again, I slip in between consciousness and unconsciousness. I start to lose my senses as I roast in pain. The sounds around me fade in and out.

Amidst the blur of consciousness, I laugh.

Han Xin, you poor fellow; been on this earth for a good two decades and no one could bother giving two shits about you. And now you’re going to die out here in some desolate desert with no one to even stand vigil for you.

Empress Dowager, rest assured Your Graciousness, even though it was you who sent me to the goddamn army, I wouldn’t haunt you if I died. Your Graciousness can rest assured and live a nice, prosperous life and have lots of grandchildren...

And Uncle, even though you never really spoiled me but you’ve never abused me, either. Well, other than locking me in the log shed from time to time. You rest assured, too. Your dear nephew would definitely not haunt you so just go on being Minister of Personnel¹...

And cousin-

Suddenly I'm doused in something cold. I open my eyes with a start and realise I'm soaked. I look all over trying to figure out what the hell happened and another bucket of water comes pouring down. It's so cold that I'm shaking like a wet dog but I manage to crack open my dry lips and swallow a few gulps while wiping my face off.

Feeling my senses returning a bit, I let out a deep breath.

Who's this nice guy giving me the elixir of life just when I'm about to die?

"This is the Deputy General of Rui you speak of?" a cold unwelcoming voice rings from above.

I slowly raise my head, only to meet a pair of icy black eyes.

¹ highest in command of the Ministry of Personnel, whose job is not unlike that of a human resource manager in present day

II: Deadlock

The young man standing in front of me has a quiet composure with deep contours, strong slanted brows and burning eyes under them. His lips form a hard line as if he's contemplating but his eyes are piercing like blades. Even a quiet composure cannot hide the fierce aura from those eyes. A heavy set of shiny silver armour rests on his shoulders. A majestic hawk soars within the golden carvings on his breast plate.

I admit I probably look like shit now: messy hair, shredded clothes, dirt-plastered face. And there he is, nicely dressed with a commanding air about him. He automatically has the upper hand. I push myself up ignoring the pain threatening to tear away the flesh from my bones and brush some of the dirt off of myself. Then I look up without a fear of his aura.

His eyes narrow and an unsympathetic grin creeps onto his face.

"Han Xin?" he asks, raising his brows.

Ah, just what you'd expect from the royal family. Even two simple words coming from his mouth come with the overwhelming sense of power that is unique to those of royal lineage; strong but not aggressive, gentle but not weak. He's just like that emperor cousin of mine—who is technically my cousin once-removed and only two years my elder. It's as if they were made from the same mold. The elegant and graceful composure of royalty that is cut, carved, sanded and refined into you from the day you're born into the palace. They've got it down to a fine art....

Snapping out of my daydreaming, I notice His Highness the crown prince has actually been waiting for my reply very patiently and politely, so much that I'm starting to think it wasn't he who made an order to douse me with freezing water.

"May I take that as an affirmative?"

His gaze is almost sharp enough to go right through me. Then he leans over slightly and asks, "How are you holding up? This sandstorm is not for the lighthearted."

I lean on the pole behind me and squint, too lazy to pretend as though I'm a selfless altruistic hero.

"You'd need to experience it first-hand before you get to judge it, your highness. Care to join?"

I probably have a really smartass expression because I see some blood vessels pop up near his temples.

But he obviously has a very good bring-up and doesn't lose his temper that easily. Instead he scoffs, "This is what has become of the grand nephew of Empress Dowager Han of Great Rui. Just look at you."

I shiver from his cold tone but casually push hair out of my face and blink several times. "War's war. It makes no difference whether or not I'm the grand nephew of Empress Dowager Han or you're the Crown Prince of Great Yan, in the end the Valkyries will take us all. 'Miright, your highness?'"

His eyes flash with what might be anger. "You have a lot of nerve, Han Xin."

"Thank you," I reply politely with a smile.

I wonder if I look sincere enough. Just so you know, being careful with your words is hard work.

He straightens up, still smiling, but his face turning gloomier by the second. "Realise who has the say here. Even if you make these smart remarks now, can you really give up your chance at life?"

My heart sinks.

I'm not a saint and definitely cannot abandon my life. But even if I don't really like being a soldier, I'm representing my country right now.

I tilt my head up and watch him with a smirk. "Of course I fear death but I also know you won't let me die before you get information on Great Rui's defenses."

His hand twitches once before closing into a fist; his smile becomes rigid.

"Since the war began," I continue, "the Yan army has been shredding through our defenses. But now you've got no such luck at Rope Hill Creek, which means you still need me, right?"

His eyes narrow like arrows, like a wolf locking onto its prey.

The people of Yan have always been fierce; the rich and the poor alike enjoy hunting on horseback. The territories of Great Rui span hundreds of thousands of acres of fertile land; the Rui court governs millions of citizens and boasts an army with several hundred thousand soldiers. Yan's power must not be underestimated for pushing such a large country to the brink of surrendering its capital city.

What did I do to become a soldier of such a nation and what did I do to come into face with such a component?

His lips curve up in an arrogant smirk.

"A saying goes: 'Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer.' I have followed this teaching without fail when I go to war—and also when I interrogate my prisoners," he explains as he takes a few steps, not looking at me. "Han Xin, grand nephew of Empress Dowager Han, orphaned at a young age, raised by Minister Han, is a well-known rich playboy of the capital city. Feel free to correct me, Deputy General Han."

An uneasy feeling creeps over me. It's definitely something to be able to get such detailed information about me. My mind's racing but I won't show him the slightest sign of fear.

He turns to face me with his burning gaze. "The soldiers of Great Rui are certainly skilled at retreating all right, so much so that we could not even capture a high-ranking general. Even a dandy like you qualifies as a Rui soldier; I am surprised Rui have survived for this long."

All the armour-clad Yan soldiers behind him chuckle with amusement.

I feel anger rising and I breathe in deeply before looking up. "That's right, I've been captured, too bad for little ol' me. That being said, what does that make the Yan army if the only person you've managed to capture is a dandy like me? If you think this kind of army can defeat Great Rui, you're out of your minds!"

Crack! I hear the air being sliced open before I even stop talking and the next moment a black shadowy arc whips towards me. I hold my arms up in front of my head instinctively and immediately I feel skin being torn apart. Something thick and wet drips down my arm.

I bite my lips and look away, not giving them the satisfaction of hearing me screaming or begging for mercy. The lashes keep coming like rain drops in a storm, and then I hear Murong Yu's emotionless voice.

"Enough. He is of no use dead."

I drop my arms and pain shoots through them. Biting down hard, I glare at him.

"You are more courageous than you appear," he notes.

He takes the whip from the guard and lifts up my chin with it. "They say Rui is the land of beautiful women; it seems as if their men are not bad, either."

I feel my anger boiling up once more.

I just fucking hate getting compared with women!

I was born like this. It's not like I wanted to!

"Your Highness, it is said male companions are popular in Rui," a large man behind him comments while rubbing his chin. "He might be a deputy general, officially, but secretly he might just be that sort of...companion for his general."

They all howl with laughter, an obscene expression on their faces.

Feeling a rush of disgust, I pound on my chest.

Murong Yu suddenly hisses, "You imbeciles! Have you not gotten enough of losing to Zhou Zhenluan? Does ridiculing a prisoner make you forget about our losses? How many days has it been? And you cannot even take down Rope Hill Creek."

You can hear anger in his voice even though he's smiling. Embarrassed, all the soldiers fall silent.

"Han Xin, if you choose to continue this, I am more than willing to accompany you until the end. I am curious as to how long you will last."



As night falls, water turns to ice and the freezing air tries to dig into my body. They put me through various kinds of torture and then when the sun disappeared, Murong Yu gave orders to toss me outside to endure the bone-stinging wind.

A desolate moonlight shines down on me. With my hands and feet frozen senseless and my numerous wounds starting to swell and exude pus, my will is the only thing keeping me alive.

I shut my eyes. Everything in the dark torture chamber is blurry except that burning flame that seems to float near my eyes.

The guard's technique is excellent; every lash hits hard and never on the same spot twice. The sound of leather whipping through air resonates throughout the room and in the end I'm literally a bloody mess.

Are they going to beat me to death?

It isn't until I lick my lips that I realise they are bitten bloody and my heart's beating so furiously it might just pop out of my chest cavity altogether.

His words still ring faintly by my ear.

'Corrupt officials have amassed much of the imperial court's power; Emperor Rui Wen himself holds little true authority; the Ministry of Personnel is slacking off and you see corruption left and right; military leaders are rising to rebel against the court and the corpses of innocent citizens cover the land. Do you really expect to save a nation on the verge of destruction with this so called loyalty of yours?'

I chuckle helplessly as I lie on the cold sand.

Of course I know that the glorious era of Great Rui has left long ago, never to come back; but I also know, I might be an useless dandy but I'm a soldier of Great Rui and as long as I'm still alive and kicking, I must serve my country.

South Hill Pass is the gate to the capital. In other words, once that gate is breached all that is Great Rui will belong to the Murong clan—and Rope Hill Creek is the last line of defense of South Hill Pass.

If I were to die, I would have to die a good man. I couldn't possibly lead an ignoble existence after betraying my nation.

But then again, I fear my so called loyalty is probably not worth shit to them.

I silently laugh and drift asleep with the bristling wind and numbing wounds.



After who knows how long, I'm wide awake squinting at the bright light in my eyes. Just as I try to sit up, a splitting pain shoots through my bones.

The sun hovers steadily in the sky and bakes the land with its heat. Soon after water vapour rises from the earth and burns my lungs with every breath. I can almost feel my scabs cracking along with the cracking earth and hear the drops of blood slowly sliding down. Maybe I'm almost dead; my mind's a blank. Right then a gust of wind sweeps burning rocks and sand right in my face as if trying to skin me alive.

Murong Yu, you fucking ass! I'd rather you aim that sword of yours at my neck; the scar will only be about the size of a plate. I fucking hate this slowly-torture-to-death bullshit! Murong Yu, I didn't know you had this sort of fetish—but then again they say people who enjoy torturing others are most likely messed up in the head. I guess this seemingly prestigious prince has actually been scarred pretty badly.

"Wa...ter."

I can't help but moan. My body feels as if it's been on fire.

"Oh, so loyal subjects need water, too?" he teases, showing up out from nowhere.

So, the royal family is also good at being sarcastic. I roll my eyes at him, pissed.

I thought all humans needed water to live. How does he not know that? Ha, perhaps his emotional trauma proves too severe to retain common knowledge-

"You fancy a drink?"

In front of me is a bowl half full of clear liquid. He holds it as sunlight dances off of the rippling surface.

Wow. I thought it would at least be pee or some muddy gunk. So, His Highness doesn't have expertise on the fine details of torture....

I continue telling him off in my head but my damn hands reach out towards the bowl as if they have a mind of their own. I prop myself up and crawl over with all my efforts. Just a bit more...and it's still out of reach.

I find a smile spreading across that damn face of his and his hand (along with the bowl!) steadily retreats further away.

Damn you, Murong Yu! Why do I feel like a rat that's being played with instead of being eaten?

I lurch forward but he swerves to one side with that bowl of water safely out of reach. I, on the other hand, drop face first onto the ground and get a mouthful of dirt.

He perks his lips, stops, comes in close and sniffs, "What a pity, oh what a pity. What a pity for this bowl of perfectly thirst-quenching water. We retrieved it all the way from the desert oasis."

He slowly tilts the bowl as he speaks. I watch as a stream of water flows over the brink of the bowl, drawing a graceful arc through the air and instantly getting sucked in hungrily by the sand right in front of my very eyes.

I slowly look up and lock on to his spiteful eyes.

I knew it! I knew he wouldn't be that kind-hearted. He gave me hope and then stomped on it while making sure I witnessed all of it.

So, the royal family is definitely good at the art of torture, excelling at both the emotional and the physiological side of it.

For a moment, I seriously consider choking him to death. Bet that would bring a tear to the Yan Emperor!

I tell myself to calm down:

Do not listen to your impulses. Beggars can't be choosers. Han Xin, you must endure! You've done so for twenty years! What's a couple more days?

I turn my head away and shut him out with my eyelids.

After all, Murong Yu is just the same as any other bully, just like all those cousins of mine. The more attention you give them, the more they pick on you; if you just ignore them they get bored and leave you alone.

A shadow blocks out the sunlight and he lifts my chin up with the silver embroidered handle of a whip, forcing me to look up at those ink black eyes.

Fuck, I hate this. It makes me feel like a fucking woman being teased.

From the looks of his fluid movements I bet that he's a playboy, the rich kind that spends all his time in brothels and in the embraces of hostesses.

"Deputy General Han," he smiles, elegant and at ease, "I have always thought that men of Rui were unworthy. But you, able to survive our harsh whipping and the cruel desert, are something else indeed."

I glance, no, roll my eyes at him.

"But even so, even if you are courageous you cannot survive without water. A young, handsome man like you, mummified alive under the scorching sun, now you would not call that a pretty sight, would you?" he asks.

He simply squats down in front of me with his brows slightly arched and a gentle smile on his face. None of the eeriness from deep inside his eyes could be detected. "Master Han, if a beautiful man like you were to come back as a handsome ghost, you would have to be one malicious spirit."

Seeing his peaceful smile makes my skin crawl.

A dried corpse on a desert, all black and burnt...ugh, gross. How could anyone let a handsome, graceful, girl-wooing, young, free spirit like me become an ugly, dry, burnt corpse on a desert?

"I must admit, I admire your courage and it is our tradition to respect our ene-"

"Hey," I interrupt, "if you're a man, cut the bullshit and end my life right now. 'Cause I'm starting to doubt that you are one."

He shrugs and pushes harder on my chin.

"Fine, there are two ways we deal with prisoners who do not crack. The first kind: dismemberment by five horses," he pauses dramatically, his hot breath hitting my face. "The second is tying you onto a horse and letting it drag you through the vast desert... How long do you think

you would last, Deputy General? With your delicate complexion, I fear it would be a worse sight than a dried corpse.”

Exhausted, I give a light scoff. “I didn’t know I had a choice, your highness. If I did though, I would choose neither. One doesn’t leave a whole corpse and the other doesn’t leave your skin intact, it completely ruins the visuals.”

Sensing a falter, I muster all my strength and grab onto his collar. I look up and snarl, “Murong Yu, I’m a man and a soldier. I’d appreciate it if you could just get it over with right here, right now.”

His body stiffens and his chest rises and drops rapidly. His expression is alarmingly dark now and the handle against my chin trembles a little.

I keep my grip on his collar, not willing to lose.

He studies me silently under the sun. His air of authority seems to push down on me as we meet in a deadlock. It’s not until quite a while has passed that he says, “I do not understand why you are holding back, Han Xin. What could you possibly gain? You have been captured for how many days now and you are the grand nephew of the empress dowager herself—you are royalty—but no one has come to rescue you or to pay a ransom. So why are you so bent on being loyal?”

My heart grows cold and his collar slips a bit from my fingers.

The empress dowager may be my great aunt but she’s never good or bad towards me. I could tell she was just acting though; she wouldn’t look at me a moment more than she had to. Now, uncle was much more obvious. I mean, even the lowest servants in the household wasn’t afraid to raise their voices to me.

I prefer fooling around outside compared to being in that inhospitable Minister of Personnel mansion² because I could care less about the disdain strangers give me. So I go on lying, cheating, fighting and just causing trouble in general while comforting myself alone at the end of each day, and soon, everyone in the capital knew me as a no-good-doer.

How wasted my twenty years of life must seem.

Being ignored and overlooked by everyone has made me learn to not believe, to not care or ask for anything, and most important of all, to survive. Because as long as you’re alive, you will live on to see another day. But now....

He holds my gaze. Emotions fluctuate within those globes and I almost see pity.

“Murong Yu! Cut the bullshit and just end it!” I bellow, not willing to accept pity.

That pair of mysterious, black eyes glisten under the sunlight.

“For men, there are only a couple of things that are of worth. Just tell us everything that you know and I promise we, Great Yan, will provide you with treasures your country has yet to behold.”

“Money, beautiful women, authority, wealth and status?” I chuckle lightly.

He nods. I shake my head and drop my gaze.

“Well, I want none of that. I only wish to live a normal life, to venture through the mountains and waters of this land, to set my eyes upon the desert sunset of the far north, to experience the

rainy season of the south, to embrace this world freely, to wed and raise a child. I don't wish for wealth, merely for peace."

He falls silent and murmurs, "That is not something someone of a royal upbringing should be saying."

I heave a sigh.

Murong Yu, when did I say I'm of any royal upbringing? They might have seen my glorious side, clad in the finest silk, but really I have nothing but tattered bits of cloth that can barely be considered clothing. People like you who really are of royal upbringing can be so damn ignorant.

I let go of his collar and look to him, "Your highness, seeing that we're both army men, why don't you just let me go right now? I'll be sure to pass on a few good words to Lucifer on your behalf when I get down there."

Then, in a flash of an eye, like a loose spring, I pull the sword out from his side. The sunlight glides across the sharp blade as I raise it to my neck.

² subject of the court are allocated residence in addition to annual salary.

III: Penil

 hat a sword!

The moment it leaves its scabbard, a chilling sensation comes rushing forth. I coolly position it in front of my neck and watch as a few strands of hair get snipped off near my ear.

Only such a sword would be fit to be the sword of a prince! And to be able to use such a sword to end my life, I wouldn't ask for it any other way.

I hear the clattering of metal and shouts of men but nobody comes forth. They probably know of the wonders of this sword. I steady my nerves and look straight at Murong Yu's surprised expression.

"What do you think you are doing!" he thunders and reaches over.

"Don't move!" I warn.

I hear my own raspy dry voice; I watch him as if looking through to his heart.

I lift my head up at the sky and annunciate each syllable, "I, Han Xin, am naught but a mortal. I had not wished to face you in a battle nor have I wanted to achieve any marvelous deeds. If I were to choose, I would rather not be of royal blood or the grand nephew of any Empress Dowager, the nephew of any Minister of Personnel!"

He holds my gaze but does not response.

"But, hear my words, Murong Yu, I would never betray my country so don't ever think you will get anything from me!"

The sun is so warm, so warm it's intoxicating. But my heart is so cold, so cold like the blade that's inches away from my neck.

He contemplates and calls out my name lowly, "Han Xin, just put the sword down first."

I narrow my eyes. "Murong Yu, I'm not afraid but if I have to go through interrogation again, I don't think I would make it out alive. Dismemberment by horse or being dragged to death out in the desert... I don't want to tempt any of them..."

My voice trails off and I feel my arms quivering but I pull that blade closer, inch by inch, without hesitation.

He chews his lips as he watches my every move.

I feel the frigid metal against my neck but no fear.

Watching that pair of somber eyes within arm's reach turn darker with each passing moment, I say my final words: "So, I only wish to die...with dignity!"

I hope I don't bring shame to the Han name by dying for my country like this.

I feel skin being sliced open. I let out a wild laugh and put more force on the sword. Warm liquid gently flows down.

Almost at the same moment, a red-tasseled spear sweeps across, knocking the blade away. I dodge instinctively away from the spearhead and the sword goes flying. Instantly, numerous weapons pin me to the ground.

Murong Yu tosses the spear away and grabs my jaw. His smile has faded.

"No one ever defies my wishes and that includes you, Han Xin. My permission is needed before anyone dies around here!"

I press my lips tightly in an attempt to suppress my fury.

"It would be a pity coming this far if I cannot even subdue a low-ranking enemy officer, now would it not?" he continues as his gaze grows colder by the second.

What did he mean by that?

His midnight black eyes outright mock me.

My insides tighten.

I hate those looks.

Those looks that I've had to take for as long as I can recall.

Those looks that you wouldn't even give to a rat.



I've been thrown into the prison again but this time around I get better treatment. A doctor has come to check on my wounds the past few days and the food isn't moldy anymore.

I take a deep breath in and immerse myself in water, not giving a care in the world, not to Murong Yu or what they have planned for me. I mean, having a bucket of bath water after long days of interrogation to wash off the dried blood and plastered dirt is just fantastic.

But would it kill them to heat up the water?

Stingy bastards.

I put on some clean garments and pull back my wet hair using the water as a mirror then stroll out the prison doors and past the guards with a smirk, feeling more refreshed than ever.

Candlelight flickers and feminine perfumes mixed with alcohol and sand waft out from Murong Yu's tent. He lies on a *ta*, eyes closed, slightly distracted. A few strands of hair hang loose lazily on his shoulders. His clear fair skin can be observed from the open collar of a snow-white robe. A woman barely wearing anything is beating his back lightly with a seductive smile.

So, this is what comes from one raised by the royal family. The beauty behind him can't even compare to his exquisite complexion. Tsk tsk, if he was a commoner, he'd probably be... Now let's not get ahead of ourselves. From the looks of it, they've already had plenty of fun in here.

Snapping out of my reverie, I notice that he has opened his eyes and his lips curve slightly upwards.

"I have discovered that you enjoy daydreaming quite a bit, Deputy General Han," he says before taking a sip from the green jade cup handed to him by the woman.

I wanted to say a smart retort but stayed silent because nothing good came to mind.

He gives a look to the woman and her smile disappears. She steps down from the *ta* and shuffles grumpily out of the tent.

"What appears to be the matter, Deputy General?" he inquires after putting down his cup. "Nothing for me today?"

"No common language, I'm afraid," I reply casually.

He gives an amused chuckle in response before taking another sip and unintentionally glancing over me.

"What a loyal subject. Unfortunately the other prisoners have not exactly been."

I glance up at him cautiously. He looks smug and puts down his cup but remains on the *ta*.

"See, we caught another soldier today. He was much more cooperative than you; just a few whippings and he gave us everything," he brags.

Another soldier? Just wait until I get my hands on him.

"Glaring at me will not help anything," he laughs amusingly. "I just wanted to inform you of the inevitable defeat of Rope Hill Creek."

He fixes his robe a bit, steps down from the *ta* and stops in front of me. His gaze wanders over me; his smile ambiguous. "Well, well, well, you certainly look sharper with some fresh garments."

I turn away and avoid his gaze.

"You were so skilled with your words. Why are they so few today? Honestly I am not quite accustomed to it."

"The fuck you want with me?"

He stops, shocked, and then guffaws while I wait patiently.

"After all this torture, this is what you wanted right? Now that you've had your wish, grant me mine. I merely wish for a quick end."

"I recommend you listen carefully to my words because I do not repeat myself," he whispers as he leans in, "Rope Hill Creek will fall, at the latest tomorrow night. You just accompany me and behold, Han Xin, its destruction."

His gaze burns into me and makes my teeth grind against each other. He gets up and tries to leave with a peculiar expression but I grab onto his sleeve.

"Tell me," I speak, trying hard to not show my worry, "who spilled?"

"You will know," he teases, "sooner or later."

"Screw you."

He turns around with an arrogant look.

"I believe there is someone more befitting of that than me, Han Xin," he remarks.



The candles in the prison burn depressingly, accentuating the eeriness and desolation.

I bury myself furiously into the grassy bundle. Dim light casts in from the windows. This sort of environment normally makes you drowsy but I am extremely alert.

Murong Yu said at the latest tomorrow night but if General Zhou is there I doubt the Pass will fall that soon. Even though the majority of forces are placed at Hill South Pass, Rope Hill Creek has been a heavily-guarded, elaborately planned point.

According to my knowledge, if...

My head drops. What does it matter what I know if I'm stuck in here?

I'd rather ride off to somewhere faraway and live a free life. I will live on and leave this place alive, I quietly tell myself, leave Great Rui alive and live on for a free life.

I hear some shuffling from the cell across from mine. I squint and catch a glimpse of a tenebrous figure through the dim firelight scuffle out from a grass pile.

No way! That looks like-

The figure wavers and jumps onto the cell door.

"Han Xin!" he calls.

"You!"

Something clicks in my head.

After waiting for that guy to finish crying and wipe his snot, I snap at him, "Are you fucking done?"

"Yeah, yeah," he sniffs.

This guy is Xie Zhen, the only son of the Minister of Defense, Xie Yun. I only hold the title of a dandy but this guy is the real deal. Drinking, prostitution, gambling; name it, he does it. With his father there to protect him, he raped and killed a young woman and it was only after they discovered she was the daughter of an influential family that his father hurriedly sent him to the army to get away from the heat. Karma's a bitch, isn't it?

It's obvious that Xie Zhen has been interrogated. You wouldn't call it a bloody mess but it was definitely hard to look at. His hair is all tangled up, whip marks cover his face and purplish red marks peek out from the gashes in his clothes.

I turn helplessly to the ceiling, suddenly bummed out.

My god, why did this guy have to be here?! What did I do to deserve this?

He sniffs and looks at me pathetically. "So they got you, too, huh."

I give him a shrug for an answer.

"It's just you?" I edge towards the cell door and ask.

He shakes his head. "There's a coupla brothers locked up too but only I got beat."

"O'course, ya idiot, just look at what your armour's made of," I groan. "Where're they?"

"We just got here," he points to the back, "o'er there, they're all over there."

Then he scans me up and down. "Did you not say anythin', Han Xin? But then how come you're not hurt? Just look at me, look at all this."

You little boob. You were probably having fun with the army hostesses when I was getting beat-

Wait! Seeing that pathetic face of his, I put two and two together.

"Tell me, Xie Zhen, it was you who spilled the beans, wasn't it?"

I just want to reach over and rustle that motherfucker up.

He starts trembling and the colour drains from his face. He drops his gaze and stays silent.

"Xie Zhen, ya little cunt. I swear I'mma kill ya if you-"

He looks up, face pale as a ghost, lips twitching nonstop. "They were gonna kill me, Han Xin. I couldn't stand it. My dad only got me. I'm his only kid. If I died, there won't be anyone to take care-"

"Save your bullshit!"

It's damn unfortunate that we're this far apart because I really want to slap some sense into him. A couple of good kicks in his guts would be nice, too.

"If those Yan bastards make it into the capital, well, you can get some incense and just go straight to your old man's grave!"

I whip my head away in anger. My heart seems to drop down an abyss.

"I didn't say much though. I only told'em there's a small path two hundred *li*³ upstream and that it's not guarded very-"

"Why didn't you tell'em everyone in the capital is gonna fuckin' die!"

He pipes down and looks down again. For a while the only sound is the crackling of the torch.

After a long silence, he stutters, "S-so, Han Xin, wha-what do we do now?"

"Your mom!" I yell, nearing the end of my fuse.

"If you fucks don't get to sleep soon I swear I'mma go down there and beat you 'til you are!" A guard shouts from the entrance.

It becomes dead silent again as if no one has ever spoken a word. No thoughts form. A wave of exhaustion hits me and I lean over and fall asleep. But my sleep is light and I seem to hear muffled speech and footsteps from somewhere outside. After a while, the noises become clearer and louder.

I shoot up and push against the door, trying hard to see down the corridor. The torch is going to die soon and doesn't illuminate much, not even the figures of the guards can be seen. Then I get down on the ground and hold my breath, listening for any sounds. There seems to be some sporadic beats of hooves, clinks and clanks of weapons and shouts. I peer out the little window and catch a glimpse of a fiery red sky.

I do a double take.

Murong Yu's about to start the invasion! What do I do?! I panic like a cat on hot bricks

As I glance at the steel lock, I hit on an idea. But then again, it's been a while since...

See, Uncle had a library full of books where I used to hide when my cousins picked on me. I used to spend entire afternoons there, reading. I didn't have the keys to it but I learned how to pick locks from some kids on the street. And so, those books accompanied me through my pathetic childhood.

I glance up nervously towards the guards as I wipe off my cold sweat. Hearing nothing out of the ordinary, I hurry with my hands. The lock falls off with a soft click. I let out a deep breath and ease out the cell after not seeing any signs of the guards.

"Han Xin."

My blood starts boiling but I turn around nonetheless, and Xie Zhen's puppy dog eyes are watching me with hope from behind the bars.

Oh, for crying out loud.

After he wiggles out like a wet eel when I open the doors for him, I sneak around the back and bust the others out too.

The flame on the wall flickers and the prison gates remain in the shadows. Just as we arrive a guard appears out of nowhere but all of us tackle him to the ground before he gets a chance. I quickly grab the torch off of the wall and toss it with a jug of the guard's liquor on a pile of dry hay. The dry hay, with the help of the alcohol, starts burning furiously.

If we're lucky we can escape tonight while Murong Yu is planning an attack. I don't have any more time to hope—it's now or never!

There's not a soul outside the prison. The prison is positioned near the back of the Yan camp so the dozen of us just starts racing out of that hell hole in the cover of the night.

Someone shouts 'Fire!' from behind us and hell breaks loose in an instant. People come rushing with buckets of water—let's hope we still have a chance to escape!

The night is atramentous and the fog is impenetrable.

The chaos has been tossed far behind us and there are sounds of water ahead. I can't help but feel relief; if there's water we can trace it back to the Great Rui camp.

I get everyone to stop for a rest after quite a distance.

"Han...Xin, you sneaky...bastard. You know...how to pick locks," Xie Zhen squeezes between pants after he plops down on the ground.

Too tired from running, I merely shake my hand and pant furiously while holding onto a tree. After an adequate rest I call out to them.

"C'mon, if we can just get to camp we can rest all we want."

The party travels along the river. The forests and undergrowth are thick near the banks and blocks out quite a bit of the moonlight, adding complications to our trek.

"So, hey, Han Xin," Xie Zhen squeezes next to me and says cautiously, watching my reaction, "After we get back, could'ja maybe pretend you didn't hear anything I said back there?"

"Of course. I won't snitch," I sniff.

He looks as if he just won the lottery so I add bitterly, “Go back and tell General Zhou everything yourself. What do you gotta worry about with a father like yours?”

His entire face scrunches up. “Everyone knows General Zhou’s famous for being strict! Even if he doesn’t cut my head off, I’ll die from the stick⁴.”

I don’t bother with replying and push on ahead. After a couple of hours the sky’s already beginning to lighten and wash out the moon. Here, the water splits into two and forces us to stop.

I’m genuinely stumped.

So, I’ve never actually been here before. I only know there’s a camp by Rope Hill Creek and you can find it if you follow the river. But this...

“Xie Zhen!” I scan around the group and pull him out. “Where did you come from? You know which way to go?”

He takes a few steps and surveys the surroundings. “It’d be the one that flows east but do you know which way’s east now?”

I consider and shake my head. The moon has disappeared and the sun hasn’t risen yet, so which direction would east be?

I turn around and see a dozen tired faces staring back at me. I remain silent and pace back to where Xie Zhen is. We watch the water wash past us to some faraway place.

Life or death lies upon this one choice.

After a long time Xie Zhen says quietly, “I think you should make the choice, Han Xin.”

Barely a moment later, the sound of hurried hooves resonate from behind us. Amidst the chaos, a sharp twang rises above the rest. Glancing to the side all I see is a single wolf-tooth white-feathered arrow.

³ Li is a traditional unit of measurement used East Asia, measuring around 323m during the Tang Dynasty.

⁴ There were mainly five forms of punishment used after the Han dynasty: 1) flogging with a wooden stick on the backside; 2) flogging with a wooden stick on the behind (not as severe); 3) community service (1-3 years); 4) exile; 5) death.

IV: Life or Death

“atch out!”

Xie Zhen pushes me away with surprising speed, and I feel the arrow tip graze my cheeks, my eyes tightly shut by instinct. The path below is covered with rocks, and immediately I get knocked off balance.

White waves wash across the surface of the river, and the ripples sting my eyes.

Wait! I can't swim! Help-

But there's no time to panic. The next moment I'm tumbling down into the river. Splash. The freezing water instantaneously starts to tunnel into my mouth, nose and ears; I can hear the water's sly chuckle. I can't think anymore with my body numb in the cold. I can only hear shouts and the bubbling from my own mouth. Hopeless, I close my eyes and feel myself suffocating slowly.

If I knew this would happen, I wouldn't have slacked off during swimming lessons.

My vision dims. My body feels light and all around me darkness and water envelop me.



I painstakingly open my eyes. Thank goodness it's not too bright.

A hand is gently wiping my forehead. I try to speak and the hand stops and then helps me sit up.

It's a young, fair girl of about fifteen. She hands me a bowl of water with a kind smile. Right in time for my parched throat. I take it and feel much better after downing the bowl in one go.

I sit up straighter and observe my surroundings. I'm lying in a pelt tent, and it's only after feeling the soft fur underneath me with my own hands that I'm convinced this is reality. I pinch my arms and face and scratch my legs and can't help but let out a breath of relief.

I didn't die; I came back alive.

Turning around, I see her beaming brighter than the sun.

“You...saved me?”

Once I speak, I notice my voice is so raspy I can barely hear it myself.

She nods and smiles but does not speak. Then she pulls the covers up, motioning me to lie back down. I feel a little uneasy and refuse to. A bold voice call from outside the door while we are disputing.

“Has the young man awoken?”

The girl gets up and lifts the curtain up. A person enters, back bent, and only after do I see who it is. A tall, buff and bearded man of about fifty walks in and smiles kindly at me. Both he and the girl are dressed in Yan attire, but they look like people of Rui to me.

“Good that you’re awake,” he says as he sits down. “That branch of the Rope Hill Creek may be narrow, but it’s a lot deeper than you think.”

Memories of that night come rushing back.

“Thank you for saving my life,” I say, my head lowered respectfully.

The man pauses then laughs, “Hearing your accent; you’re not from ‘round here, are you?”

I nod and watch for their response.

“We’re not either. In fact, we only moved here recently,” he continues. “Excuse me for asking, you look like you’re from the city, what brings you all the way out here?”

I take a big breath as I consider. They don’t look like they’ve got anything to do with the military so I answer. “I’m originally a soldier of the Rui army. I had no choice but to escape after being captured by the Yan troops, and I fell into the river when they caught up to me where the river splits.”

The man listens in silence and ponders on it before responding. “We used to reside close to the borders. Who knew when the Yan invaded the whole place’d be abandoned by the troops? Me and my daughter escaped with the other refugees and started a nomadic life here.”

He looks as though he’s in pain and falls silent. The girl quickly pats him on the back gently, eyes brimming with tears.

“Blood washed the streets. Corpses everywhere. Her poor mother was killed right in front of her. Since then she can’t speak no more,” he says sorrowfully. “Ah, this cruel world.”

Guiltily, I drop my gaze too.

I know Great Rui’s military situation hasn’t exactly been, ahem, temporary but even so, being in the capital, I’ve never thought life in the frontiers would be like this. Even the battlefield it’s not as awful as this.

“That’s enough stories for one day, I think,” he says, wiping his eyes. He then turns around and says to the girl, “Bring the porridge in and feed the young man.”

I suddenly think of the other men.

“Mister, would you happen to know where the Great Rui army is stationed currently?”

He shakes his head.

“Young man, don’t take this the wrong way but why do you even bother? There’s no way Rui’s going to win with the Yan troops this far in.” He sighs. “Listen to a word of advice. You’re still

young and got a whole life ahead of you. Run while you still can, lad, because soon this place won't be safe either."

I notice there's more than meets the ear and question. "What do you mean it won't be safe, mister?"

"The Yan troops just went by. I'm afraid it'll be another bloodbath tonight."

My breath stops and my heart beats wildly.

'Rope Hill Creek will fall, at the latest tomorrow night.'

I can almost hear Murong Yu's words out of nowhere. I quickly glance outside only to view a red sun unhurriedly sinking to the west, nearly disappearing into the dusky horizon. My stomach tightens. I roll over to get off the bed; the wounds on my back start burning right away. I can't help but cry out in pain and the man and the girl rush to prop me up.

"You can't keep up like this, young man," he says as he forces me to lie back down.

"Don't you worry about that sort of stuff anymore," he continues to comfort me. "Like they say, rather be a dog in a peaceful era than a man in a warring one. In these chaotic times, we can only hope to stay alive. You wanna go back but maybe they think you're dead already."

Getting up just now took a lot of energy and left me huffing and puffing on the bed.

All of a sudden, the stillness returns, only the sound of my breathing resonates. I quietly watch the red sun gradually disappear, leaving just a brilliant twilight against the darkening canvas. The clouds that are dyed with vivid purples and reds contrast the green trees and yellow sand, painting a beautiful portrait of the frontier.

I start to reflect on all the things that happened the past few days. Not only did I go through imprisonment, torture, jailbreak and drowning—all of which I had only escaped by a hair's breadth—I also got involved with an impossible person like Murong Yu. What lousy luck!

Has Rope Hill Creek fallen already?

From the confident and assured look he had, chances are, most likely... I don't even want to consider.

The words of my saviour ring in my ears. He's right. Must I really go back?

As for Great Rui, I've already done and given everything I could for it. Though I haven't done much for it, I haven't sold it out either. There's no one in that place who cares for me. The water of the womb is not worth a penny to those so-called family members of mine.

I shut my eyes tight and grip onto my blanket.

Maybe it'll turn out well if I just leave like this.

To the Great Rui court, I've sacrificed my life for the country; to the empress dowager and Uncle, I've died in the war; to Murong Yu, I've gone back to Great Rui and will never be on his mind again. Three birds with one stone—good for me and for everyone else.

I take a deep breath and make a solemn decision: to leave this instant.

Or going AWOL, however you might call it.

I can move around by myself by the time the sun sets thanks to my good foundation. I insist on leaving, not wanting to drag this night out longer than needed. The man, not able to dissuade me, accompanies me along with the girl to the ferry of the distributary.

The dock is busy and well-lit by candlelight even at this hour. Ships and boats of all sizes shuttle to and fro; armed soldiers of Great Rui, from the looks of their armour, are also pacing the banks. For a country with highly developed waterways, it's natural for security to be amped up during times like these.

I've already planned it out on the way here: avoid the capital as much as possible and travel via waterway to the south. When I get there the world will be what I make of it.

I'm already feeling psyched imagining my life in the near future. Hee hee.

Once I board I lean against the side of the ship pretending to doze off. I lift up my bamboo hat a bit and observe the other passengers. They all appear to be ordinary commoners but at a second glance, I find a few military men in disguise. Whether or not you are a soldier can be told from merely your posture and the vibe you give off.

I sigh softly and pull my hat further down. Looks like I need to be extra careful.

Out of nowhere, someone barks from the banks. "Move aside! Let us on for inspection!"

My stomach tightens, and I look up only to see a couple of Great Rui soldiers coming on board.

Why such lousy luck?

My palms become clammy with sweat. I bite down contemptuously; I might still have a chance to escape if I was on land but now on water it'd be impossible, even if I had wings.

I stand quietly near the bow. After checking everyone else, the soldiers approach.

"Let's take a look at your face."

A soldier reaches out to lift off my hat which I block with a raise of my hand.

"Officer, sorry about the inconvenience but I've unfortunately contracted an acute disease recently. Please excuse me."

The soldier lingers for a moment and then snaps. "We have orders to inspect every single person that boards a boat. I don't care whether you contracted a disease or not. Even if your old man died, we'd need to inspect his coffin!"

His harsh words left no room for compromise. I purse my lips. Some soldiers can't do shit on the battlefield but sure can bully innocent commoners.

I've been in the army for a couple of years now, and it's not unlikely that I'll be exposed through my speech and gestures. Realising this, fear strikes me and I lean in closer to talk, but he flips my hat off before I get my lips open.

"I knew somethin' was fishy 'bout you. Noticed you when you got here." The man hugs his arms with a sullen look. "Commoners don't hold themselves like that. You've got to be a soldier."

The soldiers behind him rush forth, causing the boat to rock. The man grabs my collar and interrogates. "What are you doing here? Speak!"

Countless possible solutions whiz through my mind in one moment.

“Sir, I believe this man’s a spy,” one of his men says.

The man stops then leers. “That’s right; he came from the other side of the border, right?”

My hands curl up in a fist. My heartbeat starts quickening.

What do I do? What do I do?

Instantaneously, without giving me any time to react, he binds my hands behind my back.

“Get going!” he hisses.

I lift my head up and stare angrily at him all while struggling to get loose, but he just chops the side of my neck. There’s a dull pain and my world goes black. Pain digs into my back. For some reason, my strength ebbs and I crumple over.



I’m freezing cold. Amidst the haziness, water swims up my nose, and I cough violently. Only after several tries do I get my eyes open.

“Still playing dead, I see.” Someone kicks me hard. “Get the fuck up!”

I frown from a splitting headache and a drowsy consciousness but struggle to get up nonetheless. I can’t help but moan after taking in my surroundings.

Another motherfucking prison cell!

After prying myself out of the jaws of a tiger, I end up in the home of wolves; I think all the bad luck I’ve collected from my past eight lives is coming onto me now. I get captured for no rhyme or reason just when I decide to leave for good—what kind of sick joke is this?

I instinctively rub my aching neck. “Where am I?” I ask.

“You’re a spy, how could you not know where you are?” The guard stops in front of me. “You better start talking now.”

I quickly glance up and the soldier is indeed clad in Great Rui armour. “Watch who you’re calling a spy! I’m a deputy general under General Zhou.”

He wavers momentarily then quickly recovers. “General Zhou’s Deputy General should be with General Zhou, naturally. Don’t try to fool me!”

“I was captured, for god’s sake, and just escaped!”

He seems surprised.

I glower and spit each word out. “Listen carefully. I was taken prisoner by the Yan and was escaping just now. Doesn’t matter if you believe me or not but I wanna see the general. He gets to decide what to do with me, got it?”

His expression changes drastically and veins start bulging out on his forehead. He lowers his head, holding onto his whip and pondering for quite a while. He then locks me in a cell and goes away, emotionless.

Tired and cold, I flop onto the ground, sighing.

There is no way of knowing if a soldier would still be on your side once they've been captured. I only wanted to stall by asking to see the general. Mercy isn't expected from him if he finds anything fishy about you. He wouldn't for my uncle's sake either.

I tilt my head up and stare at the spotty wall in front of me. A heavy feeling emerges from the bottom of my heart. It's kind of vague, kind of unreconciled.

After an extensive time, when the torches on the wall burned nearly all their fuel, when the black shadows seem to merge with the wall, no one comes and not even the slightest footstep or word can be heard.

I close my eyes, curl inward and bury my face in my knees.

So cold. So cold. So tired. So tired. So tired I can't even speak or breathe. So tired I just want to fall into deep sleep right this instant.

This is Great Rui, yet I can't feel a single shred of warmth.

Silence and tranquility surround me. There's nothing but endless black; it's as if I've gone into another reincarnation cycle.

"Han Xin."

My eyes shoot open and I see a figure standing outside my cell door through the hazy darkness. The voice didn't sound like the general but familiar nonetheless. I take a closer look—it's Xie Zhen.

He unlocks the door, sneaks in quietly and crouches down beside me.

I stare at him blankly. "You're back?"

I see his head nodding weakly but his face remains in the dark. His body is tense and his right hand hidden in his sleeve, even trembling a little.

"Must be nice having a dad like that. You get back, nothin' happens, but when I get back I get mistaken for a spy." I turn the other way and watch the torch burn shakily and the flames dance lifelessly as our two silhouettes flicker in and out of existence.

Xie Zhen's face pales as he lifts his head out of the shadows. The muscles on his face are kind of twisted up and appear extremely eerie in the gloomy prison.

"Just spit it out," I groaned as I rubbed my forehead. "You might not get the chance once the general sees me."

He drops his head down again as if trying hard to suppress something. I get impatient—since when has he been such a fuss?

A forbidding spark zooms across my eyes. He lays a chilly dagger on my neck with a flick of his wrist. "Don't move."

A cold-blooded blade lies between me and him and blocks off our words. The metal sends chills down my spine, and a sheen of cold sweat gathers on my back. Minutes tick by.

"It wouldn't have had to come down to this, Han Xin, if you hadn't come back," he says through closed jaw.

Something clicks in my head and chuckle amusingly. "Xie Zhen, are you afraid I won't keep your secret?"

He remains silent but I already know the answer from his eyes.

“That night, after you fell into the river, the Yan caught up to us and we thought, hell, if we’re gonna die anyway why not give it a shot? Then we all jumped in.” He presses down on the dagger. “I guess it wasn’t our time yet. We were rescued by Great Rui patrols.”

I look straight at him and scoff. “Right, so then you thought, since I already fell in the river the chances of me surviving are so slim no one would ever know about your betrayal. Who knew I would suddenly pop back outta nowhere and that just made you boil with worry. And you thought, why not just get rid of him altogether, right?”

He scowls. “You’re too smart, Han Xin, too smart for your own good.”

A gust of wind comes out of nowhere and blows life back to the torches, lighting up half of his face. Murderous intent is thick in the air.

I glance up and chuckle. “And here I was wondering what’s taking General Zhou so long. I guess he wasn’t even notified.”

He cracks a pained smile. “Rope Hill Creek’s gonna fall with or without me. General Zhou’s already decided to abandon this place, retreat and fortify South Hill Pass as the last stronghold.”

He opens his mouth again but stops, the hand holding the dagger slightly quavering. “I don’t wanna kill you, Han Xin. We were good buddies, getting into shit together back in the capital, but now...I have no other choice but to...”

I look at him steadily. “If I promise not to rat you out would you testify for me that I’m not a spy?”

He hesitates then shakes his head. “No, I wouldn’t. I can’t have any loose ends.”

I can’t help but laugh grimly. “You’re Xie Yun’s son, after all, cruel and cold-blooded just like him.”

Despair seems to flash in his eyes and his hand pushes down harder on the blade. I can already feel a wet trickle down my neck.

His eyes suddenly widen. “I’m sorry, Han Xin!”

“The wall has fallen! The wall has fallen! The Yan have broken in! The Yan-” Panicked shouts come from outside the prison.

Xie Zhen quickly laps into a panic and glances away. I seize the moment and push the dagger away. The next thing I know my neck is stinging with pain. He turns back around in a hurry and does the only thing he can at the moment—he raises the dagger once more and swings it at me.

The blade flashes white.

I’ve been crouching and my legs have gone so numb that I can’t dodge it. I clearly hear the sound of the dagger burying into me. It hurts as if a thousand blades have pierced through my chest.

The taste of iron gushes into my mouth. He pulls the dagger out in a rush and blood goes flying, covering my vision in a coat of crimson.

My strength seeps away as if being sucked out from me and I crumple onto the cold floor, limbs limp. Xie Zhen shakes nervously and drops the dagger. Sharp clangs ring throughout the cell.

I watch as he trips over his own feet while scurrying out of the cell in such a hurry that he forgets to lock the door.

A chill slowly creeps up on me. Only thing I can feel now is my consciousness turning blurry as if I'm floating on nothingness, rocking back and forth, drifting off to some unknown place.

My luck's probably run out. I'm afraid this is the end, my friend.

I want to laugh but I'm so weak that I can't muster the strength to do so.

How...pathetic, dying at the hands of your own countryman.

Faces flash across my eyes: Empress Dowager, Uncle, Aunt...Cousin...my gang of scoundrels.... I bet if I really died right now no one would be sad; no one would cry at my grave or burn incense for me.

Pathetic, that's how I feel.

They wouldn't weep for me even if I died. The past twenty years of my life has just been a big fat joke. As long as Great Rui stands, they can still go on being their gracious empress dowager or majestic emperor or honourable minister while I haven't even gotten the chance to see my parents' face or hear their voices.

"Parents...." My mouth painstakingly forms the words. "Dad.... Mom...."

I don't know anymore; all I see is red. Finally, along with the chill that seeps into me endlessly, a heavy black curtain finally drops in front of my eyes.

After maybe a thousand years, or maybe just a cup of tea's worth of time, I think I hear someone yell on the brink of unconsciousness.

"There's someone here...."

I only spot a blurry figure amidst the haziness and the next moment I fall into a warm embrace.

V: Unpredicted

I awake from a shiver. My eyes shoot open only to find a face that I want to beat into a pulp.

The owner of said face, Murong Yu, is sitting by the bed with his arms across his chest. His face is emotionless as though I'm simply a fruit and he's carefully deliberating whether to peel me or juice me.

His expression remains unchanged when he sees me slowly opening my eyes. "Morning."

I suddenly feel a burst of irritation. It's his damn fault that I ended up like this in the first place!

I feel a sharp pain in my chest just as I try to get up. Scarlet seeps through the white bandage. I can't help but fall back into a pile of blankets and pant as if my life depends on it.

"Save it. Just look at you. You are lucky to even wake up."

He leans in grinning and pulls the blankets back over me. There's nothing wrong with grinning but his grin is so creepy it makes me shiver.

So creepy it can't get any creepier.

"Alright, okay, okay." I push his hand away despite the pain. He frowns and grudgingly oblige. I shrug helplessly. "I'll just consider myself unlucky for ending up as your prisoner again."

He nods, seemingly satisfied. "Glad we have reached an agreement."

I catch my breath before speaking. "Being your prisoner's not that bad actually. The place I sleep in might be a bit cold, the food might be kind of bad, I might have to get beaten up every now and then but besides that it's actually not that bad."

His eyes widen as if he didn't hear me clearly. "You certainly are optimistic, huh?"

"Well, it's not like being pessimistic will get me out of here. So why should I bother?" I pause before continuing. "But let me make it clear right now: I really have no information to give you this time 'round. So don't try to make me talk or whatever because if you were going to do so you should've left me to die back there."

He coughs lightly and instantly restrains his grin, putting on a solemn face. "Saving a life is better than any offering to god. Plus it was naught but a hand's turn."

"I bet many others died during the invasion this time. Are you going to save each and every one of them?" I can't help but snicker.

The candle flame flickers, casting a dim warm light over the room. Only now do I notice it's already pitch black outside. I can't decipher the glint in his eyes as they linger over me as if searching for something.

He suddenly turns his head away. "Forget it. I know you enjoy battles of the tongue but I shall not waste time arguing with you. Here." He places a bowl of murky black medicine beside the bed. "The external ointment has been applied already so drink this."

Unsure of what he's got planned I hesitate and retreat back into the blankets.

Irritation flashes in his eyes. "If I wanted to kill you I would've done so earlier. Why go through the trouble of rescuing you? Not going to drink it? Fine!"

Despite his words, he holds out the steaming medicine steadily in front of me. I shrug, too exhausted to debate any further, and take the bowl, downing it in one go. After all I am under his roof, and I'm in no state to confront him. He might decide to kill me if I really do tick him off.

My body is tense from the pain of the wound on my chest ripping open again. It hurts as if it's being sliced open once more by a blade until you can't tell flesh apart from bone. I cover my mouth, coughing violently, the taste of iron already seeping in my mouth.

Xie Zhen, you fucking cold-blooded asshole. Oh, just you wait 'til I get my hands on you.

Suddenly a hand is on my back, patting lightly, and a handkerchief appears before me. I glance up and meet with Murong Yu's slightly delighted eyes.

I am starting to wonder while wiping my mouth; maybe I've been injured too critically. So critically that I'm hallucinating—Murong Yu is delighted to see a half-dead person?

"Thanks."

He sits back down and I let out a breath of relief. Feeling a bit chilly I pull the blanket in closer.

"How many casualties this time?" I ask.

He takes a quick peep at me. "Not many actually. About half of the Rui troops retreated back to South Hill Pass and the rest surrendered soon after we arrived."

Then a gloomy shadow dances across his eyes. "But that good-for-nothing scum—Xie Zhen, was it?—wanted to get on everyone's good side. He was so annoying so I simply put an end to him."

"What-!"

The shout not only saps all of my energy but also tugs at the gash on my chest. I instantly feel warm liquid oozing out again. In too much pain to speak, I can only glare at him while wheezing.

He raises his brows, eyes full of disdain. "Two-faced scumbags such as him are the most sickening. It does not make the slightest difference whether they live or die."

I watch him quietly not knowing what to say.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't mad that Xie Zhen hurt me this badly but suddenly hearing that he's dead leaves me feeling a bit sad. But I bet there's someone sadder than me. That's the end of His Excellency, Xie Yun's bloodline.

My skull seems to be cracking open from my headache. I pat my forehead and let out a deep breath.

Realising that I must look miserable right now I turn to him and say, "Hey, it's late and I need sleep. Do you mind leaving?"

A frown forms on his face before I even stop speaking. "This is how you thank the person who saved you? By ushering them out?"

I blink innocently and wrap myself tighter in the blankets. "What a huge coincidence that must've been! The prince himself going down into prison and saving an enemy soldier."

"That is none of your business. What you cannot deny is that I went to the prison and found a dying you, right?"

I hesitantly nod.

"But I guess you have finally got a taste of what it means to be a loyal subject, Deputy General Han." He leers and I catch a sliver of satisfaction in his eyes. "You would rather die than betray your country but who knew, after all the obstructions and hardships you return to Rui only to be labeled a spy and almost get killed by your own countrymen! Tsk, tsk. I am not sure whether to admire or pity you."

"Murong Yu!" I sit up, so angry that I don't even care about my wounds ripping open. "What sort of man speaks with such sarcasm? I never asked you to save me anyway!"

"But you can't deny that you owe me a favour." He snickers as he looks at me.

I glare at him but can't seem to find any good retorts.

"And what now?" He continues casually as if we're only discussing tomorrow's weather. "The country that you pledged loyalty to actually abandons a place they have guarded for decades, retreating with their tails between their legs, leaving behind their own soldiers. Ah...how pathetic."

His words grate my ears.

He shakes his head but the corners of his lips slyly perk up. "Even you, a member of the royal family, the grand nephew of the empress dowager, are abandoned. How pitiful, oh how piti--"

My fuse ignites as he pokes at my scars. I grab a pillow beside me and hurl it at him.

"Don't assume just because you saved me that you can ridicule--"

He catches the flying pillow in midair and flashes an enigmatic smile. "Han Xin, I had thought your looks were the only effeminate thing. I did not know you had a woman's personality too, resorting to this sort of behaviour when you're upset."

"You!"

I throw the bowl and it shoots out like an arrow but he sidesteps it. It whizzes past his shoulder and cracks on the ground with a 'clunk'. Immediately I hear shouts from the other side of the door.

"Your Highness!"

"Are you alright, Your Highness?"

“Your Highness, shall we come in?”

“I am fine. Stand down. No one enters without my permission!” He turns and replies then turns back with his usual smile and tosses the pillow back to me. “Just focus on getting yourself back into shape because from the looks of it you could not even escape if you wanted to, let alone anything else.”

I mutter through clenched jaw. “O’course I’mma run away, you idiot.”

He has just stood up but quickly snaps around and looks threateningly at me. “Say that again.”

I refuse to back down from his stare or show any fear even though it hurts like hell. After a while he grins and leans in closer.

“I think I should inform you that I was originally quite interested in your stubbornness. I even did some research on the kinds of punishment that would be harsher. I was somewhat disappointed with your sudden escape but now that you have fallen into my hands once more, I think you will find it to your liking...”

Moonlight files through a window and falls onto the floor like frost. The candlelight, on the other hand, seems much dimmer. A chill runs down my spine as I watch that eerie expression of his.

“You...” The cats got my tongue again and won’t give it back.

He laughs quite elegantly with a majestic air enough to entrance tons of inexperienced, extremely shallow and superficial women. He could get hundreds, even thousands of young pretty girls lined up for him if he wanted to.

I wonder if he’s married or not.

Because I’m really worried for that woman.

“Earth to Han Xin.”

His voice rings beside my ears making me jump in my seat. Only when I gather my thoughts again do I realise his face is looming right in front of me. I quickly pull away but his body pushes closer.

He grabs my chin forcefully. “You’re an interesting one, aren’t you?”

Puffs of hot air hit my face making me kind of uncomfortable. But he has a firm hold on me so I turn my face away and wave my hands. “If you want to torture me, fine, go right ahead, but at least wait ‘til I recover. Please leave now.”

He chuckles as if he heard something hilarious.

The pressure on my throat leaves and I gulp for air while glaring loathingly at the culprit for my near-suffocation.

He paces slowly to the door, sparks dancing in his eyes but no words coming out. Then he leaves with a grin.



Sloppy piles of books lay before me, already defiled by yours truly. I rub my eyes and lie back onto my pillow, sighing here and there with my eyes shut. Other than reading on my bed, I could do nothing but eat, sleep, drink and apply medicine for the past couple of days. Well, either read or go off to la-la-land.

Murong Yu's been a nice chap though, getting me a stack of books to relieve me of my boredom but when I think of the torture he's going to put me through once I recover, I can't feel any gratitude towards him.

Sigh...

Sigh...

I survey the quiet room blankly then grab some blankets and wrap myself in comforting warmth.

The sunlight is just right outside. It streams through the carved window⁵ and forms spots on the floor, making the room feel even more desolate.

My mind starts to wander and I think, if that guy was here, I'd at least have someone to bicker with. I mean it beats lying on my bed alone with nothing to do.

At least it'd be sort of fun.

My chest is starting to ache with pain again. The gash that Xie Zhen left was too deep, after all. The doctor said that if it was the tiniest bit deeper and a fraction more to the right even the reincarnation of the legendary Hua Tuo⁶ could not save me.

Of course, when I'm all snug inside this cozy cotton blanket, I admit, albeit bitterly, that Xie Zhen would've probably had better aim if Murong Yu hadn't invaded with his men at that time and startled him.

I let out another sigh, flipping through the pages of the book in front of me and then wrap myself tight with the blanket.

That's enough wandering. Why waste your energy thinking about that useless stuff. What is important right now is recovering and finding an opportunity to escape. As to where I shall escape to...

Well, I haven't exactly decided yet but surely not the capital and I can't stay here either.
Murong Yu-

As soon as I think about him my lips start twitching uncontrollably. I've had the worst luck ever since I met him. I've literally gone to hell and back—several times! Could it be that our birth signs aren't compatible?

The slightly opened door is suddenly pushed open and I hear footsteps stop by the bed. I know who it is so I point to the table. "Put it on the table. I'll eat it later, thanks."

I've barely finished when my blanket is ripped away. A chilly breeze hits me and I shiver. I reach out and take the blanket back. "I'm sick right now! You can torture me after I've recovered!"

As expected, Murong Yu's voice comes from above. "You sure are energetic for a sick person."

I roll my eyes at him and ignore him by turning away. This sort of thing happens every day and I've gotten tired of wasting my words on him.

Unexpectedly, he sits down on the edge of the bed and flings my blanket to the other end of the bed. "It is time to apply your medication."

Then he starts taking my clothes off. Startled, I struggle a bit and almost fall off the bed but he pulls me back and forces me to stay still.

I initiate my last line of defense when he's twisting the cap off the bottle. "C'mon man... I mean every day! Don't you find it troublesome?"

I can't hear any emotion in his voice. "Do you not find it troublesome to resist, every day, and end up like this anyway, every day?"

Not wanting to deal with him anymore, I relax and bury my head into the pillow and let him apply the ointment on me. The lashes from the whippings haven't healed completely yet and every application is just as hard to bear as the original whipping. I'm having trouble breathing because of the pain and no matter how I move it's agonizing.

"Hey...can't you be...a bit gentler...I mean...do you even know how to do this?"

"Hey. It's my first time, too. Just bear with it." He says casually as he pushes aside wet hair on my forehead.

What. The. Hell. Keep your hands, which are supposed to be applying ointment, to yourself!

But I bear with it until the end despite my complaints. Swear to god, I can't let him do this next time, or else, I might just die from this and not from that dead bastard Xie Zhen.

He cleans up the medicine and I put on my clothes while getting up. He sits down quietly at the table, takes a cup and pours tea into it. He's not wearing his armour today; instead it's just a light-coloured robe. His hair is partly tied up and his expression relaxed. It's as if he's come for a hike and not for war.

Except for that black sword by his waist, of course.

He picks up the cup and shoots a look at me as if he's contemplating and searching at the same time.

"Han Xin, do you want to know how many prisoners we've captured?" He swallows some tea and smiles leisurely.

I roll my eyes at him and reply grudgingly. "Oh, Your Highness, I think you should consider visiting the army hostesses instead of bickering with this sickly person. You certainly should take advantage of this break in the war and enjoy yourself to the fullest."

If I were him I would rather have delicate women in my embrace than applying ointment on someone.

He just keeps smiling as if he hasn't heard me. After a bit he says, "Of course I will visit them but now is not the time. They tell me Jiangnan⁷ in Great Rui is a place of gentle drizzles, red cherry blossoms and green weeping willows."

Looking up, he recites⁸:

*Fair lands lie in the southeast;
The center of the Wu provinces,
Hangzhou has always flourished.
Misty willow trees and exquisitely carved bridges;
Emerald green beaded curtains sway in the wind,
A hundred thousand residences scatter unevenly across.
Spreads of forest snake along the sandy shores;
The rugged waves crash and form snowy froth,
The endless Qiantang River protects the city.
Pearls and jewels line the markets;
The people dress in vibrant silks,
Rushing to display opulence.*

*The overlapping mountain peaks about West Lake are gorgeous;
There are sweet olives in the third month of autumn,
And ten li of lotus flowers.
Woodwinds play on sunny days;
Water-chestnut collectors' songs fill the night,
Delighting old fishermen and lotus picking girls.
The ivory flag posts of a thousand men
Listen to the flutes and drums, wine in hand;
Revel in the splendid scenery, rhymes in mind.
I shall paint this landscape down one day
And display it in the Imperial court.*

My stomach tightens and my arms and legs go rigid but his eyes are sparkling. "From what I hear, the women from south of the Yangtze are all graceful, agile and as beautiful as flowers in bloom; every frown, every smile, every scold and every tantrum is filled with passion—by far, much better than any hostess we have here. And let me tell you, I am a very patient man."

Not waiting for him to finish, I blurt out. "You're going for South Hill Pass?"

He sips some tea before replying. "So what if I am? It is only a matter of time. No need to be so alarmed."

He looks up at me with a satisfied smile. "I hope you are not planning to stay a loyal subject after all this, are you?"

He has a casual expression but his eyes speak confidence. My mouth opens but no words come out.

“My troops are going through some calibrating these few days. When the time comes, bringing down South Hill Pass, no, even the capital of Rui, will be a piece of cake.”

Hearing his words makes me dumbfounded and the hairs on my neck stand up. I rush off the bed after a moment’s hesitation and stumble a few steps. I speak once I find my balance. “No way. South Hill Pass was made and kept since the establishment of the country itself. It won’t fall just because you say so.”

He stops but bellows out in laughter the next moment. He puts the cup down and walks towards me.

The Yan have always been a tall people. I’m actually considered tall amongst Rui men but I’m still some fractions shorter than Murong Yu. With his back to the light, his expressions and features are all hidden in the shadows and yet his body emits an apparent and powerful aura that rests on your shoulders like dead weights. He comes in closer, not giving me any possibility to escape.

He spells out. “The city might be dead but the people in it are alive.”

I glance up a little bit and see him smirking delightfully.

A thought flies through my mind: he’s saying...there is a spy!

“And also,” he leans in even closer, lips almost touching my ear, “I suggest you do not even attempt to run away. You do not want to tempt me a second time. The punishment will be more than you can handle.”

I look into his black eyes and remain quiet; his brows dance upward and a satisfied smile spreads on his face.

⁵ Windows and room doors were made of wood and had paper instead of glass. Wealthy people often had artists carve exquisite designs so that beautiful shadows may form when light passes through the paper.

⁶ Hua Tuo is a legendary medicine practitioner in Ancient China. It is said he could cure any illness and perform miracles.

⁷ Jiangnan literally means ‘south of the river’. The river is the Yangtze River and Jiangnan is used to refer to the south banks of the lower reaches of the river. This area is historically known to be a rich, fertile and beautiful land and has enjoyed much prosperity throughout the dynasties.

⁸ This is a poem written by Liu Yong (987 – 1053) in the Song Dynasty. It is rumoured that Prince Hailing of Jin (kingdom to the north of Song) invaded Song after reading this poem and becoming entranced by the promises of treasures in the south.

VI: Times Past

The attack on South Hill Pass hasn't been commenced yet for some reason. At least it hasn't by the time I become well enough to walk freely. Well, I did recover pretty quickly which, Murong Yu says, is all due to the good medicine that was originally prepared for him.

No matter what, he saved me and I owe him a big one.

I shake my head in an effort to get all these haphazard thoughts out and then put down the pile of books I had in my arms onto his desk. I turn around to leave.

"Han Xin," he says without even looking up and points to the teapot. "There is no more tea. Make another pot, and remember—I want it hot, not warm!"

I start to curse him in my mind.

Who do you think I am, Murong Yu? Your personal retinue? It's not like you didn't have any before I came along!

But despite my discontent I pick up the pot obediently. He looks up with a smile, eyes narrowed, as if content with my behaviour. I flash a foolish grin and take my leave.

Sunlight comes pouring down in brilliant gold beams through the thin layers of clouds and hits the ground with spots of various sizes. There is no one on the training field other than some soldiers on watch duty.

I crouch in front of the stove and zone out while the water boils.

I'm being ordered around by him because of that big favour that I owe him. It hasn't even been a day yet and I have become his favourite entourage to order around. I have to follow him around from the moment he leaves the training field; when he eats, I serve; when he reads reports, I grind ink; even when he sleeps, I have to make the bed. If I show the tiniest sign of unwillingness he would give me a discontent look and bark at me: 'Do you want to go back to prison that badly?'

Staring at the flames burning carelessly in the stove, I unknowingly shake my head.

Of course I don't. I still think it's better to have some freedom than none at all—even if it means getting bullied by him like this. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. It's not like it's the first time shitty things are happening to me. Plus I must find a way to get the hell away from this place...

I let out a soft sigh, reminiscing the events of the past few days.

See, I found such a way a couple days ago. I had discovered that one guard would secretly go meet with his gal. I had observed him closely for several days but right when I got ready to execute my escape plan on a windy, moonless night Murong Yu stopped me in an odd way.

‘I can’t sleep. Come sit with me.’

His face had been buried in the shadow of the moonlight. I couldn’t see his expression or decipher his tone so all I could do was plop down nervously next to him on the grass. He had on a white night robe. His face was lowered and the gaze that was usually icy and distant had lost its ice, leaving only cold loneliness in those globes.

He didn’t speak and I didn’t want to tempt him so we just sat there in chilling silence.

A breeze had blown across the field and swept dead grass up into the air, making the thin blades dance a desolate dance under the frosty silver moonlight.

I have no idea what could have made a mighty crown prince like him that lonely. He’s the first-born son of the Yan Emperor. The emperor especially adores him even though his mother passed away early, bestowing him peerage at a very young age. Furthermore, he has many victorious campaigns under his belt. Chances are that he will be the one to ascend the throne in the near future and hold incredible power and immense wealth.

Therefore, I had thought: Shouldn’t he be in high spirits instead and get more fired up with each battle? Why would there be loneliness in his eyes like that?

‘What are you...looking at me for?’

His utterance had startled me and I saw he was already looking up so I hurriedly turned away and focused on the grass in front of me.

‘Why can’t you sleep again?’

I saw him shaking his head from the corner of my eyes. ‘I do not know. I just can’t. It’s weird. I fall asleep the moment my head hits the pillow on those nights when the sound of battle echoed all around the camp but I actually cannot fall asleep now that it’s nice and quiet.’

He chuckled; the shape of his brows was almost gentle as he pushed strands of loose hair out of the way. I gave a light smile and remained silent. We remained that way until the moon climbed to the top of the sky.

Only then did he mumble. ‘It is late. Let us all go to bed.’

The sound of water boiling brings me out of my daze. I shoot up and reach out to pour the boiling water into the pot, but something goes ‘thump’ behind me. I dodge to the side instinctively. Something brushes past my face with a sharp whistle.

A booby trap? How come it hasn’t gone off before?

I stay in the corner for some time but there doesn’t seem to be any more activity so I stick my head out. After checking (several times), I come out of hiding. Only when I wander near the door do I find sunlight coming through a hole the size of a nail in the paper.

I study it for quite some time...but I've got nothing.

Slightly frustrated, I go to the other wall and indeed I find a corresponding hole but only after picking at it for a long time do I find a silver needle about an inch long. A small paper ball is pinned snugly onto the wall by it.

You're kidding me. Again?

My lips twitch.

Can't the old geezer use a more normal method? He just has to be all mysterious....

I can't help but howl, albeit secretly in my mind, after reading the note. If he has ways to get that note to me how could he not know that I'm being dragged around on a very short leash by Murong Yu practically everywhere he goes?

Depressed, I fling the note into the fire. The flames suddenly flash but dim again the next moment. I decide to accept my misfortunes and pick up the tea pot and walk out sighing.

I pass a couple of low-ranking military officers who are chit chatting amongst themselves.

"The prince is probably gonna get another big fat bonus from the emperor right?"

"I think so. His Highness has rendered outstanding contributions. I mean, we're right outside South Hill Pass! How much more outstanding than that can ya get?"

"I heard the emperor's people're almost here. He-he, I wonder what sorta reward His Highness'll receive this time...perhaps a coupla fine beauties⁹...."

Their voices fade away as I turn a corner to get to Murong Yu's room and mull over what I just heard.

Hmm. It seems like the Yan Emperor dotes on him quite a bit, sending people over this urgently. He's probably worried for this son of his who's out at war. Perfectly normal to send a couple of women over-

But come to think of it, I don't think I've seen him with a woman lately. Hmm. What a diligent worker.

My thoughts are ruthlessly interrupted by Murong Yu's unfriendly voice.

"Hey, you didn't go get water, did you?"

"Huh?" I stop in my tracks, run through some ideas and put on an honest face before replying. "Yeah, the fire was too slow so...."

He looks up from his military reports and glares at me, to which I respond with an innocent look and a hot steaming cup of tea. He shrugs and he takes a small sip before sticking his head into those reports again.

I sit down in the corner, bored out of my skull, so I pick up a random book. I get past a couple of lines before waves of exhaustion hit me but I don't dare fall asleep on him. My eyes meander around the room and somehow end up back on him.

Normally he would bicker with me but when he gets down to business he is 120% focused. His eyes don't stray and his brush keeps moving; his head is lowered and his eyes unblinking, as if he's drowning in that pile of reports.

He's sitting at his desk so I can only see one side of him. Sunlight falls softly through the windows and lines his figure with an extremely pale light, making the outlines of his face even more distinct. His tall nose bridge, tightly pursed lips and slightly furrowed brows—seems as though he's in deep thought. There's none of the usual overwhelming aura or any inhospitality. Even the playfulness he has when he bickers with me is gone.

I nod slowly. I must admit, he's an outstanding man. I've gotten to know him better after being with him these days: he's probably the prince who leads battles most often, he definitely has a very unfriendly personality (he's fine when he squabbles with me but he's basically a frozen hunk of ice in front of other people), but a cold personality, even a slightly twisted one, is understandable seeing that his mother died early....

I fall asleep from boredom with the book in hand in this warm stuffy room.

After who knows how long, I kind of feel light breaths on me and a warm hand on my cheek. I think it is part of my dream so I bat at it with my hand and it disappears. I shift into a more comfortable position and continue to chat with the Sandman.

But soon after the strange sensation comes back again and doesn't stop.

"Shtawppit...." I grumble as I turn my face away.

The funny feeling follows and I get irritated. I rip my eyes open and see Murong Yu about a step away. It looks as if he had just put his hands behind his back and looked away. His lips are pursed and he turns his head away calmly.

I rub my eyes, touch my face, yawn and ask him, "Aren't you supposed to be reading those reports of yours?"

I see his lips moving but nothing comes out. His eyes dart around and something about it seems unnatural but it disappears the next moment. He rolls his eyes at me but refuse to give me a reply.

Okay then.... I have never actually seen him looking uneasy like this before.

My gaze seems to irritate him and he frowns. "Just what are you looking at?"

"Nothin'." I shrug. "Just not fully awake yet."

He rolls his eyes a little and sits back down. "I'm done with these. Put them back." He points to the pile of reports.

I nod in acknowledgement and just as I finish stacking them all up and get them in my arms he gets up and stops me.

"Do you not want to know what the reports say, Han Xin?" He leans in and asks.

I waver but it hits me right away.

Murong Yu, this sort of second-rate trick won't work on me. My cousins pulled the same thing the first time they bullied me all those years back. If I can't fight I can still run, can't I?

I smile politely. "Sorry, I'm not interested."

He watches me suspiciously as if trying to dig two holes in me.

I yawn again lazily. "I shall take my leave if there is nothing else, Your Highness."

Then I casually turn and leave with the reports not giving his reaction a care in the world.

The old geezer said that he'd meet me at some windy, moonless, completely deserted place where birds don't even fly over. This leaves me anticipating.

Well, his name is obviously not 'old geezer' but that's how I secretly call him in my mind. His name is Liao Tianyi. Uncle used to hire him as the household's live-in teacher. Uncle had told me that he was a man of talent, knowledge and wisdom and a famous scholar but that he had a strange personality. He didn't want to hold any titles or recognition and only wanted to be a teacher at the Minister's Mansion.

If I have to think of something good I got from that place, it would have to be him. He had taught us to read and write and to debate and compose. He would also tell us many epic tales of heroes and adventurers and when he did every one of us, no matter how much of a troublemaker we were, listened attentively with wide, impressed eyes.

A lot of the times he wouldn't even get mad if he found me hiding in the library reading,. Instead he would smile kindly, pat my head and tell me, one by one, about things such as how to run a country, strategies, tactics and other stuff I don't think I would ever need in my life.

I had asked him, many times, why he told me those things, but he'd always give me an indecipherable reply.

'You'll have a need for them one day, Han Xin.' He would say.

I enjoyed having a teacher like that very much though I still can't understand a lot of what he has taught me. There was someone who applies medicine for me when my cousins bullied me, someone who read stories for me, someone who saw me as a proper human being, someone who cared....

Just when I start to worry about how I'm supposed to sneak out and meet with the old geezer with Murong Yu's constant surveillance, Murong Yu actually tells me that he needs to see to some officials coming from the Yan court, sent by the emperor, so I won't be needed.

Hallelujah!

I don't forget about his unnerving gaze and chilling expression, of course, while I'm secretly celebrating.

"No wandering around without my permission. If you dare even try running away...you will wish you were never born!" He warns.

I arrive at the rendezvous at the agreed time. After bearing close to one hour of the night wind's cruel and unforgiving torture, I start to wonder: did the old geezer decide to blow me off?

The night is tranquil and nothing stirs.

I wrap my clothes tighter in hopes to regain some warmth. After who knows how long, the moon has already gone into hiding behind gloomy clouds and left the blazing orange camp fires off in the distance as the only light source.

I curl myself into the corner as I hear faint footsteps of patrols and the metallic clanking. I huff into my hands and only then I realise they're almost frozen.

I curse under my breath. "You'd better not stand me up, old geezer-"

"Who are you talking 'bout, you lil' rascal."

Something hits me hard on my head and I quickly glance up to see a person watching me leisurely with a whip in hand. I squint and stand up when I finally recognize him.

“Old geezer-”

He smirks as he whacks me again. “Is that what you call your teacher now, you lil’ punk?”

“Sorry. Sorry.” I immediately correct myself. “Master Liao.”

Everyone else knows him as a talented scholar but I know he also has a few more tricks up his sleeve that he just never shows publicly. So I don’t even need to wonder how he got in here; the silver needle the other day is also a regular of his.

We look like two soldiers trying to keep warm as we huddle together.

The old geezer is in his forties but his eyes are as sharp as ever. There’s some dark-coloured stubble on his jaw and his black robe makes him look ever lankier.

“Master, if you can come and go from here so freely why don’t you bring me along? Saves me all this suffering.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “I can’t believe you’d say something that shameful.”

I heave an exasperated sigh. “But Master, it’s not like I wanted to get caught. Plus I can’t leave by myself. Why all the hassle coming here if you really want me to die in here?”

He smiles again. “It doesn’t look so bad to me. I mean you’re doing a pretty good job pourin’ and serving tea and such.”

My breath catches short. “I have to because if I don’t I’d suffer even more!”

“Anyway, I didn’t come to chit-chat today.” He faces me with a serious look. “I need to talk with you.”

I haven’t heard him speak in such a tone and an ominous feeling starts edging up on me.

“Han Xin, when are you going to stop this act? I hope you aren’t planning to continue this for the rest of your life.”

My heart jumps to my throat. I get up to leave, not wanting to listen any further, but he hooks onto my wrist.

“I know. You have been ignored and bullied since you were young and you have never given a damn. But now that it has come to this, are you still going to continue this act?” His tone is full of warning.

I turn my head away, not wanting to respond now the cat has been let out of the bag.

“You might be all cozy up here but do you know what is happening out there?”

“Of course I do.” I scoff lightly.” All the lords of Great Rui have sent their army to aid the emperor but all have faced absolute defeat in the face of the Yan army. No survivors. Not even the lords. Marshal Heng in the south has a large army under command but there’s no sign of him sending reinforcements and the capital is facing imminent danger now that Rope Hill Creek has fallen.”

He nods as his emotionless eyes watch me. “Good. You do know a thing or two.”

“But what does that all have to do with me?” I violently snatch my hand away. “All I want is to live a normal life. All this nobility status is nothing but a burden. Plus no one even sees me that

way. I am already doing them a huge favour, not busting their asses after all those whippings! Whether they live or die has nothing to do with me.”

“Watch your mouth!” He immediately scowls angrily. “You are not only nobility, you are....”

“Huh?”

I take a peek at him, feeling a piece of the puzzle missing.

His body shakes as he quietly stares at me. After a while he turns around and ignores me. I lightly tug on his sleeve, thinking I probably overdid it this time.

“C’m on. I apologize,” I mutter. “Master Liao....”

“How could you possibly say that it has nothing to do with you?”

His voice is extremely soft as if he’s asking me but asking himself at the same time. I stop and watch him, not knowing what to do.

The silence is like death, holding everything around us in place. Countless thoughts run through my head and I can’t form any solid ones.

He turns with a mysterious expression and declares. “You will never have a normal life, Han Xin.”

I see red like I’ve just been hammered on the head. I shoot up and turn to him.

“This is my life! No one can live it for me. And all this war and nation bullshit has nothing to do with me!”

I start dashing away when I hear his voice from behind. “And you are fine living under them?”

I whip around and glare at him, my tone as certain as metal. “I will leave! Whether it’s this place or Great Rui!”

Icy wind whistles past.

I trudge along a small path with no sense of direction. The moon peeks through the clouds and shines a desolate shadow on the ground. There’s no sign of people anywhere. After turning a corner I glance up unknowingly and suddenly stop in my tracks. A lonely figure is sitting in the gallery.

Isn’t that...Murong Yu? Isn’t he meeting with some Yan officials or something? Why would he be sitting here this late by himself?

He’s clothed in a simple light-coloured robe. His head is slightly bowed; his eyes shut as if in deep thought but an awesome nimbus still hovers about him. A wine pot is held in front of him and the wind sends over a strong waft of alcohol.

I guess he’s in a bad mood or something.

Deciding not to bug him, I nudge backwards and am about to leave when...

“Not another step.”

I halt and he slowly looks up. “Han Xin, come...drink with me.”

They say wine brings joy to the heart¹⁰. After we down more than a few cups in our stomachs, our cheeks flush and our conversation becomes more spirited.

“As I had expected...Father sending his people today...” He picks up his cup and speaks to the sky and the moon. “He doesn’t completely trust me after all.”

“No way...” I rest my head upon my hand and watch the liquor in my cup as I ask. “Why’d a father...not trust his own son?”

He downs the entire cup and smirks bitterly. “You wouldn’t...understand.”

I take a sip and glance at him. “An’ that’s why you’re drinkin’ by yourself?”

He nods and fills up his cup again.

“Ya know, you’ll feel better if you talk about it.”

He suddenly glowers with suspicion and I hurriedly add, “Isokay if you don’t though. I don’t wanna invade your privacy...or whatever.”

An unfamiliar emotion flashes in his eyes. Sadness? I’m stumped. Sadness? Not really a word fit for him.

He hesitantly utters. “I’m...Crown Prince of Yan but...no’ne knows that I’ve Rui blood in me too. Mother was the daughter of...an influential family in Rui and was taken by Father in a battle. Father admired her...talent and passion an’ made her his concubine.”

He bows his head down and whispers so softly I can barely hear him. “But...Mother hated ‘im. Even when she gave birth t’ me...she still hated ‘im...and was ambivalent even to me.”

Suddenly I think of the parents that I’ve never met and my heart clenches. I pat him on his back empathetically. But he doesn’t stop there—probably had too much to drink.

“Mother missed her home dearly...an’ died six years after givin’ birth t’ me...Father might be fond o’ me...but I’ve four brothers who all come from prestigious backgrounds...so I’ve no one to rely on...but myself.”

I’m sprawled on the stone table as I gaze at him through hazy eyes—probably had too much to drink, too. “So...so you lead your troops and fight battles everywhere?”

“They all have the support of their maternal relatives¹¹...but I’ve got nothing...Only military accomplishments can help me secure my position.”

Now that I have the bigger picture, I nod knowingly. “And now yer father doesn’t trust you...so that’s why yer...yer sad.”

He dips his head down in a nod but comes up again to look at me. He points a long slender finger at me. “Bingo.”

He pours another cup to the brim and stares at me for a minute before remembering his words.

“So, Han Xin, what were...your parents like?”

I close my eyes tight, my mind a mess. I mutter after contemplating, “I...dunno...I’ve ne’er met them.”

“Surely you remember...a lil’?”

I shake my head and drink up. “I...really dunno...I can’t recall anything before age nine.”

His eyes widen. “What d’you mean?”

“E’ery time I...tried t’ remember...my head wud hurt so much...so I just stopped tryin’.”

His face flushes red and a mist gathers in those black eyes.

“I guess that’s one thing we ‘ave in common.”

My surroundings become fuzzy and I can't see Murong Yu that well either. I titter as I drink one last cup and feel my body float like a feather while my vision blurs out of focus.

After a long period of giddiness, I suddenly feel something soft underneath me. My body gets hotter and hotter and my head gets heavier and heavier. I toss and turn around in the dizziness and find a comfy spot and then get ready for a good night's sleep.

Then something heavy is squishing me.

Stupid alcohol, look what you've done. I can't even open my eyes, let alone get this thing off.

After a few attempts, it actually becomes heavier. That stupid alcohol was actually quite strong—I'm practically burning. But suddenly I feel something cold. I peel open my eyelids only to see a pair of glowing black eyes. I look into them for a moment then start glancing around and catch a glimpse of my naked chest.

No wonder. Shirt—Where's my shirt?

Hot breaths hit my face. I think there's someone trying to talk to me but I can't hear shit with this headache.

What the heck is going on?

I feel my face getting hotter and a scorching tongue pushes into my mouth, going into every corner with its fiery temperature as if it's found an outlet. I only recognize the face after several attempts.

Murong Yu's shadow completely enshrouds me. His rushed pants sound especially rough from above. His face is getting more and more flushed and his usually clear eyes have become tainted with lust. He peers at my useless struggles and his breathing becomes more ragged.

My drunken mind tries to process this information but before it gets to a conclusion he dips down again in a blink of an eye. I instinctively turn my head to one side and I feel my neck being sucked and gnawed on.

Wha-what the hell is he doing? Could it be that he's so drunk that he's mistaken me for a woman? Or maybe he got aroused from the alcohol?

I mean, I haven't seen him with a woman recently. Or maybe...he's also interested in men. I shift over a bit and giggle.

"Whasso funny?" He breathes beside my ear while rubbing me all over the place.

So, His Highness, the crown prince, has this special fetish, too. Why didn't he just tell me earlier? It's nothing to be embarrassed about; I won't make fun of him.

"Murong Yu!"

"Wut?"

I finally get Lothario's claws under control and instruct, "Out the door, turn left an' go to the end. There's a three-storey building wit' a string o' red lanterns—the most famous brothel in town. If you keep goin' in you'll see the male brothel. Tall'uns, short'uns, fat'uns, skinny uns, whatever you want, they've got. Don't you worry. I'll hook you up, brother. It's on me—I can get you 20% off."

I give him a hearty clap on the shoulder too to show him what a good-hearted, generous friend I am and instantly I feel his weight leave a bit.

What a smart guy. He gets it already.

Considering this, I let go of his hands and roll over. I mumble as I drag the blankets along, “I won’t get in the way o’ the long night that lies ahead o’ you...just don’t forget t’ shut the door on yer way out...ah, tired...”

I yawn but a palm unexpectedly scrapes loudly across my face. I snap back up but he’s already standing, pulling his robe on and watching me with a face like thunder.

Any sign of sleep disappears instantly. I sit there with my hand on my face, not sure what to do. His highness’s face is stormy and his lips are twitching. His whole body is tense save for his wildly rising and falling chest. It’s as if he’s trying to suppress extreme anger.

Wh-what?

I only thought what you were thinking and worried about what you were worried about. I won’t laugh at you even if I know about your little secret. It’s not even rare for royalty to have male lovers.

So why did you have to hit me?

He scowls and then whips around, not forgetting to slam the door shut.

Bang! Dust collected on the door ledge comes fluttering down, and even the candle flames shake.

“Weirdo.”

Only after a while I put my hand down and collapse on my pillow.

⁹ The usual rewards for military victory are gold, land, raise in position, and women, and as Prince Royal, Murong Yu can’t possibly have anymore of the former three.

¹⁰ [alt: wine brings people closer]

¹¹ It is almost always the case that an emperor takes the daughter of an influential and powerful family as empress consort in order to gain political leverage and to aid him in controlling the country. High-ranking concubines are also often used in such ways. Thus, Murong Yu’s mother was likely not a high-ranking concubine, so even if Murong Yu is the emperor’s first-born as well as the son of someone he truly loved, Murong Yu was born with little power compared to his brothers and, to some extent, his sisters.

VII: Unexpected

I roll over with the blankets wrapped around me. Gentle light shines in through the windows and I pull the covers over my head. After a nice long rest, I sit up and roll out of the bed. I shiver from the loss of warmth and it wakes me up quite a bit.

My head still aches with a dull pain and I close my eyes. I guess I need to watch the alcohol from now on—it's as though my head's going to crack open. I roughly comb my messy hair and when I open my eyes, I'm shocked because I'm shirtless.

I'm pretty sure I don't have any weird habit of sleeping nude.

Last night. What happened last night?

I try really hard to conjure up the memory but it's like looking through thick fog—nothing seems real. The last thing I remember is seeing the old geezer, and getting in an argument with him and then drinking with Murong Yu. I look down and spot some blueish and reddish marks but I'm pretty sure I didn't get hurt. So where did these come from?

I scour every corner of my brain but when I get no answers I simply give up.

I leave my room after washing up. The morning sun paints large golden blots on the limestone path. The cool, moist morning breeze hits my face. I look up at the sky; the weather is gorgeous, not a cloud in sight. The sky's a clear solid blue. I can hear faint sounds of splashing streams and of windy grasslands from outside the city walls.

It was spring when I accompanied General Zhou here and now autumn's coming. Time has gone by so fast.

I feel kind of guilty when I remember the old geezer's angered expression from last night. It was my first time seeing him since I entered the army and now I really regret driving him away like that. Maybe if I had just been a bit more patient he might've given in and brought me away from this place. Yet, what can I do but sigh in regret now that he's left?

I head towards Murong Yu's room, wondering how he would punish me for waking up late when a few of the personal retainers of his appear from around the corner ahead with plates and glasses in their arms. They all have tense, anxious expressions on their faces and sneak whispers to

each other from time to time but when one of them spots me his troubled expression immediately disappears.

“My friend!” He claps my shoulder, beaming. “Why don’t you do us a favour and bring these to His Highness for us?”

Puzzled, I inquire. “But didn’t you just come from over there?”

Without waiting for me to finish, they stick the things into my arms.

“His Highness has been in a really bad mood since He awakened, for some reason, and we’re all too scared to go in—what if His Highness puts us on the block even when we didn’t do anything wrong?”

Unsatisfied with their explanation, I retort. “Oh, so I’m not scared? For your information, I don’t wanna be on the block either!”

“Oh no, no, no. That wouldn’t happen. We all see how His Highness treats you. Don’t you worry about it, my friend!”

In the end, I can’t out-talk them so I brace myself and march over to his room. Looking through the window, I see that his back’s to me. He doesn’t have his armour on, just a loosely-fitted robe and his hair has only been gathered simply into a single bunch. Several pieces of paper lie open on his desk as if he’s writing military reports but there are only a few messy lines. A small mountain of crumpled balls of ink-blotted paper rests on one side of the desk.

He’s still in a bad mood?

I glance down at the things in my arm: a cold bowl of congee and a few pastries. It’s obviously breakfast. He hasn’t eaten yet, although it’s completely past the time for breakfast?

I finally speak after lots of deliberating.

“I...I brought you your breakfast.”

His figure moves the slightest bit. Dazzling sunlight pours through the window sill and onto his shoulders, dragging his tall figure onto the grey floor into a long, desolate shadow.

“Han Xin... just put it on the table.” His head turns slightly during his moment of hesitation.

I gently put the food on the table and turn to leave but turn back around when I get to the door.

“Um... At least try to take a bite or two, even if you’re in a bad mood.” I whisper.

He might’ve said something but I’m not sure. Quietly I tidy up the pile of paper and just when I’m about to get out the door he halts me. When he turns around, I see an exhausted face of someone who hasn’t slept the whole night. His brows tightly knit together and his gaze wanders.

He mumbles after a long silence. “Did you...have a good night’s rest?”

I nod though I’m not sure why he asked such a bizarre question. “I drank too much last night. I slept well but my head hurt when I got up.”

He has a strange expression and his eyes start wandering again. Then he nods. “You’re a light drinker alright.”

Why is he acting so weird today? Discussing drinking with me instead of writing his reports.

He holds my gaze, a blade-like wrinkle in between his brows. His cheeks seem to turn faintly pink but I can't be sure.

Does he have a fever?

"Hey." I point at him. "Maybe you should go see the army doctor. Look at you, all flushed. You're probably sick or something."

I can't help but secretly snicker at this crown prince who can't even take care of himself. I go over to the table and pour a cup of tea for him. He takes it and grins, playing with the cup instead of drinking it.

"I'll go call the doctor¹²." I walk towards the door without looking at him. "Better solve the problem early on. I need to see him too anyways."

He whips around and looks at me. "Wha-what's wrong?"

I shrug and point at my neck. "I don't know. These weird blueish reddish marks just appeared out of nowhere."

He seems to hesitate for a moment before tossing his cup aside, his uneasiness nowhere to be found the next moment.

"Where? Let me see."

He comes quickly towards me but I frown and wave my hand. "No, thank you, Your Highness; I think I'll just get the doctor."

I slip out of there before he gets close.

He's clearly acting strange today since morning. Normally, when I'm serving him, he would bicker with me if he's free. We would throw retorts back and forth and it would generally be a good time.

But today, the atmosphere is very unusual, no, strange, to be precise.

By lunchtime, he still has an anxious look, his gaze remains jittery and he doesn't talk to me as much. And when I serve lunch, he eats one more helping than usual. Also, he would mumble to himself 'Why? Why?' or have a serious look as if he's brooding over something very important.

Finally he is able to settle down and sweep all the paper balls and inky paper off of his desk and then spread brand new pages out to write on. I turn to leave after I prepare ink and make tea.

What a nice afternoon; it'd be a waste to not take a nice long na-

"Where do you think you're going?"

I stop in my tracks and meet his focused gaze.

"To take a nap of course. My head still kind of hurts for some reason." I casually say.

He looks as though he choked on his own spit when he heard what I said. He looks around and points to a chair behind him. "Don't go anywhere. Sit here. So I can keep my eyes on you."

I bite down angrily and shuffle grudgingly over to the chair. He perks his lips and goes back to his work.

For moments, the sound of ink brush gliding across quality rice paper fills the room. A faint fragrance of ink hovers in the air and the blazing sun coming from the back of the room warms the whole room up.

I don't know when the book I have been reading falls into my lap. I lean back into the chair, my eyes drooping down. Finally I give into the Sandman's invitation to some high tea. My sleep is light as always; I can still hear some tiny rustling of paper through my dozing.

Then it's heavy footsteps, of a soldier, and also clanging of metal against the ground.

"Your Highness—"

The person's words seem to be interrupted. Then there is ruffling of cloth.

"Let us take this outside."

Tranquility returns to the room. Unintentionally I shift in the chair. The chair's arm digs into me and I open my eyes.

The sunlight is still pouring into the room leisurely, sprinkling golden spots everywhere. I yawn silently and sit up straight.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, Your Highness, the prisoner has been identified as Duke Yu Qing¹³ of Rui."

I hear Murong Yu's delightfully proud laughter. "Let us see what else they have got up their sleeves now that all the dukes¹⁴ of Rui have either been killed or captured."

My insides knot up.

The proud and elegant Duke Yu Qing is the only person in the royal family who doesn't have a care for status or wealth and has never got involved with the court and politics. He has spent all his gifts and talents on a grand project to collect literature of numerous famous poets and writers. Is Great Rui in such danger that even Duke Yu Qing must go to battle for it?

My brain is a cluster. My knuckles are turning white from holding onto the chair.

Even Duke Yu Qing has gotten captured?

"Rui has been going downhill since Duke Zhao Rui's uprising twelve years ago. The members of the royal family have declined and now even Lord Book-Worm here has been forced to go into battle." His voice is filled with vain and contempt.

"It is common knowledge that the current Emperor Wen is ill and stays within the confines of his palace all year long. With no royal heir present, I wonder what will become of the throne if he dies of stress from this war."

"Well put, Your Highness," the person speaks in a low tone in an effort to suppress delight. "Presently our men's spirits are high. If we take this opportunity to attack, surely we can take South Hill Pass with no problem and aim straight for the capital city!"

"No. South Hill Pass is easy to defend but difficult to attack, not to mention Zhou Zhenluan himself is stationed there. We must not act hastily if we are to be victorious."

"According to our double agents, Zhou Zhenluan has much on his plate. The Minister of Defense, Xie Yun, has placed many of his own people into the army to restrict Zhou Zhenluan's actions. Conflict between the two is becoming more heated by the minute."

"Tsk, ts. To think that they would fight amongst themselves at a time like this. Well, better for us that they do; victory looks more promising by the minute. Only South Hill Pass still stands—but not for much longer!"

“Your Highness, once South Hill Pass falls under your steeds, your military accomplishments will stack higher than ever. With enormous military power in hand, fighting for the throne will be like taking candy from a baby-”

“Silence!” Murong Yu barks.

The person immediately slaps his own mouth three times as punishment.

“I shall not hear such words again. Not even I can protect you if they get out.¹⁵” After a moment’s pause he calmly speaks again. “Taking the Pass down in the shortest amount of time is the only thing that should be on your minds presently.”

The person tentatively continues. “Your Highness, You’re out here all by Yourself while, from what our people back in the capital tell us, Your brothers, they’ve began to take action. And His Majesty’s health has been unstable lately, Your Highness...”

The entire yard is quiet save for the wind and the leaves that it disturbs, disturbing the peaceful afternoon at the same time.

“**I-I** shall consider what you have said. You may leave.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. I shall take my leave now.”

Hearing all this, I feel kind of down. I’m not sure whether for the inevitable conflict between his brothers or for the seemingly dim future of Great Rui, or perhaps for my own unknown path.

Murong Yu doesn’t speak another word for the rest of the afternoon. He just puts on his armour and goes to the training field without a word.

I witness his army’s might from afar—a wave of black that knows no boundaries. Metallic sunlight flashes coldly off the iron plates and stings my eyes. A black gold-embroidered general’s flag flies up into the air, billowing in the wind, a single character ‘Yan’ written boldly in silver. Black helmets and iron plates stand in rigid formation below the platform.

Murong Yu stands in glistening silver armour, not a hair out of place, the white eagle feathers on his helmet glow as if alive, emitting beams of icy light. A scorching but dazzling light radiates from his body that forces you to shy away.

A blessed son of god.

I can’t help but admit, such a person means fortune for Yan but doom for Great Rui.

With prestige flowing in his blood, he cannot allow any disdain. Therefore the battlefield is his best stage. On the battlefield, he is a soldier who slays his foes with a wave of his sword but in the near future, he will reach the absolute pinnacle and become the sovereign ruler of the Yan empire.

I chuckle to myself.

God has never been fair.

And the difference between me and him would be understated if I said he is the clouds and I’m the dirt.

But it’s all right because I’m okay with what I have and what I can and cannot have.



Murong Yu gathers many of his men in his room after supper. It looks as if they've got very important matters to discuss.

I sneakily head to the prison. The guards know that I'm Murong Yu's personal retinue so they don't give me a hard time.

It becomes colder as I pass through the dim walkways and deeper into the prison. A rotten, moldy smell hits me and I have to hold my breath. The torches squeak and wheeze on the walls and cast shadows and figures everywhere, making it all the more creepier. I don't stop until I reach the innermost cell.

Is that famous scholar of a lord locked in that tiny cramped place?

Under the dim torch light, I catch a glimpse of a person sitting in silence in the corner. His light body frame seems weak and frail. He looks miserable under the flickering lights; his face is so pale it's transparent. His eyes are tightly shut as if in deep sleep but his pale slender fingers are slightly quivering.

I gently crouch down, not wanting to disturb him.

It is him, after all, Duke Yu Qing.

Suddenly he starts coughing violently and my heart clenches. "Are you alright, my Lordship?"

His eyes slowly open and he stares at me, fazed, like he doesn't know me. Only after a minute does he slowly but surely call out my name, "Han Xin."

"I knew you were still alive." He sits up a little and moves towards me with a light smile.

I nod guiltily and he smiles again. "It's not easy at times like these."

"Did they hurt you, Your Lordship?"

He shakes his head and his smile disappears.

"No. I'm a duke, after all. They would not dare." He looks up at me and asks. "But I bet they put you through a lot, huh?"

I lower my gaze. "Just a few whippings, nothing really."

After a long silence, I continue. "Your Lordship, has it really gotten to the point that even you must...?"

I fall quiet.

"Yes," he says with such ease it's like he's talking about someone else. "It has."

He heaves a deep sigh and the sparkle in his eyes fades. "I'm just a book lover; I've devoted my life to ink and paper. Now that I've failed, I do not wish for anything but a clean, noble death."

I bite my lips and gaze at him. His eyes are dark and his expression clear as usual as if he's seen past life and death. I'm not sure what to say all of a sudden.

He studies me from the corners of his eyes. "I haven't seen you for quite some time; you look more and more like him."

"I beg your pardon?" My body shakes and I look up, shocked.

He stares at the half-foot-wide hole in the wall as if he hasn't heard me, as if he's forgotten about my existence, as if he's talking to himself.

"Twelve years. If only he had succeeded twelve years ago, Great Rui wouldn't be what it is today..."

Him?

Who?

"Great Rui's establishment was based on scholarship; many of the royals are scholars. But only him, only he was skilled in martial arts, if only he was the emperor now, if only..."

I can't help it any longer and I reach in through the bars to grab his shoulders.

"Who is he? Your Lordship, who is he? And what does he have to do with me?"

Duke Yu Qing looks steadily at me as if trying to find something from my face and then he shakes his head. He grabs onto my hands with strength as though he wants to break my wrists.

"Promise me one thing, Han Xin!"

I try hard to suppress my surprise and anxiety and nod. "Anything, Your Lordship. As long as it's within my abilities, consider it done."

"Return! You must return!"

I blink in confusion.

He holds my gaze and smiles hopelessly. "I have one son, not yet one. I hope you can take care of him for me."

"Why does Your Lordship say such things? You shall return too!"

I don't understand. Why is he, Duke Yu Qing, suddenly asking me to take care of his son?

I glance back at him but I feel his smile has turned cold.

"You really take after him. Perhaps, perhaps you can fulfill his will."

He suddenly releases my hand and sighs again. He cups my face with soft hands and he looks lovingly at me in the way a father would his son.

I cautiously ask him after much thought. "Can Your Lordship tell me, who this 'he' is? And what does he have to do with me?"

"Do you really want to know?" He leans motionless against the cell door and cracks a tired smile.

"There is no need to know!"

A thunderous voice booms near my ears and I quickly turn around. A silhouette is standing a couple of steps away in between the torch and me.

Murong Yu!

His figure is stiff and tense like metal. I can't decipher anything from those midnight orbs that are raven like the night sky. He rushes forth, grabs me by the wrist and drags me out before I get a word of complaint out of my mouth. I only feel a sharp pain from my wrist amidst the push and shove.

"Let go of me, Murong Yu!"

He keeps pushing on pretending to not have heard me. We're outside in the blink of an eye. Everything is covered in a light veil of white by the cool moonlight.

I stop after prying his grip off and yell at him. "Are you crazy? He's just someone I've known for a long time! And why did you have to interrupt him?"

He whips around with a ridiculous smile and steps towards me. I automatically back away. I can feel a cold aura coming from his eyes.

"I *am* crazy." He says as he comes closer. I back up step by step. He seems like a complete different person today.

I feel my back press against the wall and I start panicking. With nowhere to go I can only look him straight in the eye.

"Do you really not remember what happened last night?"

I feel something heavy in the air pushing me down and I squeeze out a few weak words. "I told you, I got drunk and forgot everything."

"Lies. You do remember."

Are you kidding me? I don't need you to tell me what is in my own brain or not!

"You're acting up. Go take a cold shower!" I don't want to continue this conversation so I lift up an arm to push him away and leave.

"Stop moving."

His voice sounds extremely close. I instinctively raise a hand to block him but the moment my hand touches him it's tightly restricted by his. His hand's cool just like glacial ice. I wiggle my hand around in an attempt to break free but he only tightens his grip.

"I told you to not move, Han Xin." His lips feel really close to my ears.

"Alright, okay, tell me what you want then."

We stare at each other and the silence seems to freeze time. He suddenly steps closer, imprisons me in between his arms without answering my question and brings his body closer. I struggle but to no avail.

"Just what are you doing?" I hiss.

Little blasts of hot air brush my face. It's a bit ticklish. He lifts my face up and studies it with a burning look. Before I know it his lips are on mine—a bit cool like his hand. My body freezes over, letting him do as he pleases.

My head spins, my limbs are restricted, my breath is stolen and an irresistible power replaces the cool sensation from before with an overwhelming heat.

He releases me only after a long, long kiss. I can't help but pant for fresh air.

"*This* is what I wanted." His voice is husky and stiff.

I calm myself down and glare at him with clenched jaw.

Don't think you can do as you please with me just because I'm a prisoner.

"I said before, if you like men you can go to a brothel! I won't let you belittle me like this just because I'm your prisoner!"

He stops and the grip on my arm quickly tightens. “You think I’m belittling you, Han Xin?” He sounds a bit upset.

“If not, what is it then that you’re doing right now?” I question.

I glare at him and buckle around trying to break free.

A playful smile dances on his lips. “You really think so, Han Xin?”

I look daggers at him while he laughs softly by my ears. I think his jaw is clenching.

He leans in, his breath brushing my neck. “I really want to crack that thick skull of yours open and see what exactly you have inside.”

I frown. What shit is this guy spewing? I can’t make head or tails of this.

His lips are on mine again before I get anything sorted out. He pries open my teeth and his tongue swipes over every single place in my mouth, not allowing me to hide, forcing me to respond.

“Mmm.” My head spins from anger and I try to push him away with all my might.

The next moment a frightened shriek disturbs the peaceful night.

“Yu! Wh-What are you two doing?!”

¹² Specifically, the army doctor.

¹³ 毓慶 (*yu4 qing4*), literally ‘foster prosperity’.

¹⁴ Duke, here, refers to the highest possible peerage in most Chinese dynasties and the title translates literally as ‘related king’. This title is usually only bestowed to male relatives of the emperor, as it suggests.

¹⁵ Speaking disrespectfully of the emperor can be seen as actually committing the act and punished accordingly as, in this case, disloyalty towards brothers and attempt at taking the crown.

VIII: Menete

“Hey! You hold it right there!” A girl orders loudly, “Answer me this instant! I forbid you to ignore me!”

I saunter ahead of her with my arms full while she yells at me.

Crack!

A whip flies across. I quickly step behind a pillar and steer clear of it.

“A real man faces his problems! Not hides from them!” she taunts with all her might.

I can’t help but shake my head. I edge my way out from behind.

“Women are simply impossible to please,” I comment casually.

“How dare you! I will have you-”

She strikes down with her whip backhand and slices the air. The lashes come down like rain but I dodge them all, remaining unharmed.

I suppose she got tired after a while so she stands, leaning on a pillar. She wipes her forehead dry and looks daggers at me while huffing and puffing. I shrug and leisurely lean against another pillar.

“Haven’t you had enough fun for one morning, Duchess Xiao? I still have matters to attend to before his highness returns or else punishment awaits me.”

The girl in front of me is no more than seventeen. Her eyes and teeth have a healthy glow like rows of pearls and her cheeks are naturally rosy. She looks like a piece of viridescent jade¹⁶ bathed in water at first glance, forming a brilliant contrast with her fire-red cloak.

Her name is Xiao Qinyun, grandniece of Empress Dowager of Yan. She was bestowed the Dukedom of Zhao Peng¹⁷ the moment she was born and has been doted on ever since. Not only does she have the vanity of the blue-blooded, there’s a certain passion and temper that you don’t see in most noblewomen.

She sits on a railing, brows raised and eyes wide. “Don’t try to threaten me with my dear Yu¹⁸. He doesn’t scare me. Also, you’re nothing but a prisoner. How dare you speak to me like that?”

“Yes, my Duchess.” I nod and grin. “Your noble birth allows you to look down upon all else, even his highness the prince.”

According to her words, she's Murong Yu's fiancée. She came here in two shakes to see him after catching wind of his victory, bringing over a hundred in her entourage. The residence became filled with so many people that it doesn't seem like a military base anymore.

Murong Yu keeps his army on a tight leash and would normally never allow such a thing but he can do nothing except let Xiao Qinyun run wild for the empress dowager's sake.

"You-" Her face goes red and she hops off, whip in hand.

I quickly dodge back behind the pillar. "Wait just a second. If you keep up this mischief, there's no guarantee that the Prince won't send you back. You know how he is—he won't cut you any slack."

Her eyes droop and her lips pucker. Soon her eyes are brimming with tears. She looks down and wipes at her eyes with her sleeve.

I can't help but feel a bit guilty seeing this.

It's so painfully obvious that Murong Yu can't care less about this 'fiancée' of his. He didn't say much to her that night when she got here with a trail of smoke. He only gave some orders for the servants to send her to bed without a single word of romance or comfort that a gentleman would have offered.

'I don't fancy her.' He had turned to me after she had left. 'Her father is the Left¹⁹ Prime Minister, an influential official in the Yan court. We do not even have an engagement. She just likes me of her own accord. Don't think too much of it.'

I hear muffled sobbing coming from those trembling shoulders. Right now, she's just a heartbroken little girl with no vanity whatsoever.

Sigh. I just can't stand to see a pretty lady cry.

I approach her and fish out a handkerchief from my breast pocket. "Here."

She sniffles, turning away from my offer. I extend it out further.

"Don't worry." I coax. "It's just been washed. Squeaky clean,"

"I refuse to accept such a foul thing from a man like you."

"Fine with me." I eyeball her while pulling the handkerchief back. "I still have to return it to His Highness. This is his after—"

In the blink of an eye, she plucks it out of my hand. She holds it tightly in her hand after dabbing at her tears with it, unwilling to part with it.

I snicker in my head. This little gal is head over heels for Murong Yu but I don't know if she's going to live happily ever after.

"There, there. Wipe those tears. We can't let your fiancée see you like this, now can we?"

She makes a faint noise that I barely catch. I turn my attention away and lean on the railing. The winds of the frontier in September bring chills cold enough to freeze my face. The leaves have all fallen from the trees in the distance. One last dried leaf gets blown off its branch and twirls slowly to the ground.

She gnaws on her lips and opens her mouth as if to say something but abandons it several times.

“Ask away,” I tell her.

“I-I want to know what Yu likes.”

“Hmm.” I pause. “Well, I haven’t seen him care about anything since I became his manservant. He keeps a poker face all day long like he’s got a stick up his ass.”

“Yu’s been that way as far as I can recall. Cold. Withdrawn. The palace maids said that he was six years old when his mother passed away. He knelt before her catafalque and wept for an entire night.”

I sigh lightly, for no reason beyond sympathy and pity.

I’m not of the royal family but even I know that without a mother’s protection, a prince has no support in the imperial court. I can almost picture that lonely, heartbroken boy. I wonder how much torment he had to bear and how many obstacles he had to overcome to get to where he is today.

She looks up, her face pink and her eyes pleading. “Tell me what exactly my darling likes. I want to make him happy. I want him to like me.”

I frown but I don’t want to disappoint her. It wouldn’t necessarily be bad for Murong Yu to be loved without any ulterior motives by a person like this.

“Well,” I consider some options. “I heard, the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. It’s worth a try. You brought chefs along with you, right?”

She props her chin on her hands. “That does make sense, I suppose. And I know his favourite dish is crispy almond roll. My chefs know how to make it, too!”

I nod eagerly. “So you gotta learn how to make that. He’ll definitely be impressed when you bring him a hot steaming plate of that whatchamallit roll. He’ll realise that his fiancée is so refined and kind and he’ll take a liking to you.”

What a lame excuse. Only a little girl like her would believe it.

She gets up looking rather satisfied.

“Alright, that settles it.” She claps and declares cheerfully, “I shall pay a visit to my chef now.”

I sigh in relief. She’s been bugging me all morning to figure out what Murong Yu and I were doing that night when she arrived. It’s not like I’m going to inform her of her fiancée’s fondness for men. That’d be too hurtful.

I scoop up my things but before I can even take a step she gets in my way.

“Han Xin, don’t think you’re off the hook just yet.” She looks me right in the eyes. “Explain yourself. What were you doing with my Yu that night?”

My smile stiffens and I spit curses in my mind. I can’t come up with anything in response when I see her delicate young face. She raises her eyebrows, clearly not going to give up until I come clean. But I have got to hand it to myself. I simply gaze right back at her while keeping my composure.

“What are you two up to?”

Yes! Finally, rescue has come! I celebrate in my mind.

I spot Murong Yu standing in the yard with a slight turn of my head. He doesn’t look too good, a bit more somber than usual.

“Han Xin.” His gaze lingers on us but his expression doesn’t lighten up. “You still have not completed what I asked you to in the morning, yet you are here conversing with the duchess?”

Xiao Qinyun is already leaping towards him with her train lifted in her hands before he finishes.

“Yuuu!” She grabs his arm and beams. “Where have you been, honey? It’s so late now. Qinyun’s²⁰ been waiting for you.”

You’d expect any man to be moved when a cute lady’s beside you but his face only lightens up the slightest.

“Duchess of Zhao Peng, please realise you are standing on military grounds and not your manor. I advise you to be mindful of your actions.”

“Aww, c’mom. Can’t you relax for one minute? Why do you have to be so serious all the time?” She sticks her tongue out playfully and looks Murong Yu up and down.

He watches me with a stern expression. I sense discontent too. I remain silent and pick my things up.

“Come with me, Han Xin.” He stops me before I get to leave.

When I look, he has somehow escaped Xiao Qinyun’s embrace and is already walking away. She is stomping on the ground, face flushed and heatedly chewing on her amaranth lips. I think she’s doing her best to keep calm. I give her a slight nod when I brush past her to remind her of my advice.

“What’s taking so long?”

I quickly pick up my pace.

“You sure were enjoying yourself with the duchess, not doing any work.” He comments nonchalantly while eyeing me.

“Hmmp.” I reply casually. “Oh, I wouldn’t dare. It’s just that the duchess was inquiring about what happened that night. How dare a prisoner of war like me disobey her orders?”

Murong Yu pauses and regards me. “I said, you’re my...my retinue. It would be best that you don’t get involved with her.”

Hmmp. You just don’t want to see your fiancée talking with another man. What a jerk.

“Yes, your highness. I shall not converse with the duchess. Happy?” I drone and then continue in a low but clear voice. “But I hope you sit her down sometime and explain what exactly happened that night to her so she doesn’t get the chance to converse with me anymore.”

He wavers a bit and grins. “That night? I didn’t think you could recall.”

I slow my pace discreetly. He drops his grin and his eyes turn sullen.



Xiao Qinyun stays in the kitchen with the chefs the whole afternoon, surprisingly, not taking even outside. That being said, being the doted-on Duchess that she is, she has never once had to do any sort of housework before. It's only natural that she's awkward and clumsy even if she undergoes intensive training at the last minute.

I can't bear to look at the steaming pastry on the table in front of me but when I see her eager expression I can only grab a piece and stuff it in my mouth.

You reap what you sow. 'Tis the eternal truth.

I can't help but exclaim:

COUGH! COUGH! COUGH!

I thought I saw the reapers before me.



Murong Yu gives me a weird look and passes a cup of tea over before looking back down at the board²¹. I start feeling better only after taking a few gulps.

“What's the matter? You have been coughing nonstop the whole afternoon.” He picks up a white stone but lingers.

Your fiancée is really on another level. Even the pastries that she makes are on another level. Not even the army rations can compare.

Well, that's what I almost said—but I made a promise of secrecy and I intend to keep it.

I make some vague explanation and wait for his move, black stone in hand. He wanted to play *Go* with me after finishing his business in the afternoon. I agreed since I was bored anyway.

He's white; I'm black. When the match began the stones were placed down at a feverish pace, capturing and removing the other colour fervently. It only slowed down after twenty or so turns each.

While I was taught by the old geezer to stick to turning defense into offense, Murong Yu's strategy is the exact opposite. Swift and fierce, his stones swept across the field.

Clunk. He looks up at me after placing his stone. I ruminate and place my stone down. His smile instantly disappears, a frown taking its place as he sits up straight.

Murong Yu has played aggressively, capturing many eyes²², and showed signs of victory. I, on the other hand, have been seemingly retreating but really advancing, leaving plan B's and C's everywhere. After many turns, the white and black stones have started closing in on each other, interlocking and interweaving together.

Murong Yu's slanted brows furrow together, making him appear rather exquisite and smart. He knocks his knuckles gently against the edge of the table while I remain motionless, contemplating my next moves.

I was once a careless punk and the old geezer made me play *Go* to train my patience. When one plays *Go*, one must consider one's moves seven moves in advance before placing a stone, he had said. Only after losing a katrillion times did I start becoming more patient and careful.

I see Murong Yu placing his white stone on the board and immediately follow with my own. All of a sudden the playing field is full of weak points. A grin spreads on his face and he attacks relentlessly. I retreat every turn until he boldly plays a few stones. I see the chance before me and take it without hesitation, a black stone landing right on target.

His eyes go wide, his lips purse tightly and his hand lingers in midair, not showing signs of lowering.

After a moment, he tosses his stone back and heaves a light sigh. "I have lost."

"You went easy on me, Your Highness." I grin.

He nods in my direction and then leans back on his chair. "I can tell, though your moves may seem light and weak, they are, in reality, fast and ferocious. The slightest mistake and your opponent falls right into your hands."

"Your tactics were sharp and precise with the dominating prowess and style of a king, Your Highness." I toy around with a stone. Its soft texture emits gentle warmth into my palm.

"Give me a break." He shakes his head, amused. "I have heard enough from you to know better."

I'm clearing the board when he asks, "Han Xin, do you know what is the most essential of all military tactics?"

"Thoroughly assessing the situation, the enemies' and your own capabilities; that is the key to being victorious." It slips out of my mouth before I realise.

He lightly nods in approval. "*Go* is comparable to war. For every step you take, you must plan for the next ten and also be conscious of your opponent's intentions. Only then can you rest assured and proceed. The art of *Go* is also the art of war. And you are a Deputy General."

Then he halts me and asks curiously. "So why have I never witnessed a display of your strategic skills on the battlefield before?"

I pause. "Well, what can I say? I'm just a care-free spirit who dilly-dally my days away doing nothing. It'd be a miracle if I kept out of trouble so I can't afford the luxury to 'display my skills'."

His eyes shine as if he's caught on to something.

"I beg to differ. Since you were captured, you have been behaving just like your *Go* pieces. Your life rests in the enemy's hands, yet you show no fear. You're hiding your talent, biding your time. Suicide, arson, prison break, drowning and you're still alive and kicking. I believe that whoever could perform

such feats is far from average."

"Thank you." I grin. "But really I'm scared of dying, so all I do is try my best to stay alive."

He leans in, eyes narrowed. "Not how I see it. You'd wanted to die when you took my sword. Now, you're imprisoned in enemy territory, serving under me without a word of complaint. I would argue that you are biding your time."

“Biding my time? Oh please, Your Highness. I don’t hold any military power, what would I be biding my time for?”

“Not necessarily. A spectator sees more of the game. I don’t know who taught you to play *Go* but I can tell there is more than meets the eye.” He grins, rapping on the board with his knuckles. “There is much relation. Whether it’s warfare or the administration of a nation.”

It’s just *Go*. How could it possibly be related to so many other things?

“It may seem like you are not concerned for your country but in reality that is not the case.”

I can’t quite decipher his look. I pause.

“If you mean Duke Yu Qing, I can’t deny it. He’s an old acquaintance after all...” I sigh, leaving my words unfinished.

The duke may be a scholar but he still has the arrogance and pride of one of royal lineage. He doesn’t surrender; he doesn’t sell out his country. He ended up choosing the most dignifying end: self-starvation.

Murong Yu knows well of royal pride and has granted him the liberty.

As for me, I simply couldn’t find the courage to face him again. I had stood before the door, hesitated and, in the end, left.

Three days after our match, Duke Yu Qing passes away. He went quietly, not one bit unkempt or sallow until the very end. Dressed tidily, he closed his eyes for eternity with the faintest smile. This loyal duke has used his own life to uphold the last bit of dignity of Great Rui’s royal family.

Murong Yu holds a fitting service for him and orders all captured Great Rui soldiers to keep vigil for him.

As a man of the army, I understand well that a general who respects his enemies will, in turn, be respected by his people.

The soldiers start to dissipate as night falls. I stand before Duke Yu Qing’s casket, coming to a realisation.

We’re all the same in the face of the reaper, no matter the poorest poor or the richest rich. At times of peril, one can only hope to live to see another day. And the same goes for me. I don’t know why my parents left me so early but I can be sure that they wanted me to watch the brilliant sun rise every morning in their place.

I sit on a winding fence, absentmindedly watching the sun sink down, painting the earth vermillion.

“What are you thinking there all by yourself?”

I glance to the side to see Murong Yu approaching. He pats me on the back. I look back down.

“Thanks, for what you did for Duke Yu Qing.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t mention it. I was just following my mother’s teachings.”

“I don’t think I have seen you like this before.” He sighs. “Could it be that you’re homesick?”

I stay silent—silent as the bloody sky before me.

I'm not sure if I am or not. To be honest, I'm more comfortable living like this right now. The rich and wealthy capital, the imperial palace, my uncle's magnificent mansion, none of them has ever spared me much warmth.

The chilly evening wind of September brushes over my skin, sending chills, making every grass and every tree, every brick and every tile seem so cold and distant.

"I respect him." He sits beside me, eyes flashing. "But it shall not stop me from advancing."

I turn to him. He turns too and our eyes clash. There's evident resolution and sharpness in his stare that is scorching like the sun.

"Marshal Heng who was stationed in the southern Rui has finally embarked and will reach the Rui capital in no more than two months." He sounds so casual like he's talking about the weather.

"I am sure you know a thing or two about him."

I look away and grunt in reply.

It has been an open secret for a long time that Marshal Heng thirsts for control over the royal family. His objectives are clear from the fact that he's only heading up to the capital now.

"It'll be both a fortune and misfortune that the marshal's returning to the capital." I sigh.

He looks over, eyes burning into me, and chuckles. I bite my lips, feeling sad for some reason, and turn away, not wanting to look at those shadowy orbs.

Suddenly he stands up, closes in and towers over me, immersing me in his shadow.

"Don't worry about it." Hot breath hits my face. "I hope you won't have anything to do with that stuff ever again."

I don't know why he's saying that but I shake my head and reply, "No can do. It's where I was born. It's where I was brought up. My life is destined to be intertwined with it."

His expression changes, his jaw clenching tightly, and I sense anger though I can't understand why. In a blink of an eye, he grabs on to my wrist and pulls me up. I tumble into his embrace. I'm not in any mood to fight with him in my saddened state. I only want to get out of here and be left alone.

"Let go."

"Han Xin," he barks. Pain shoots through my arm. "Why must you cross me every time?"

"I don't." I glance up and yell back just as loudly. "It was you who started it today."

"You do!"

"You're outta your mind."

He glares at me and I glare back, not backing down.

The seconds tick by and finally, I can't stand this awkward position anymore. "Your fiancée is still present in the camp, Your Highness. I ask that you refrain from inappropriate behaviour."

"You!" he hisses angrily. He continues to glare and then suddenly leans in.

"Not again, mhm..."

His lips are already against mine before I can object and they start intruding without a moment's hesitation. A warm heat surrounds me. My body feels weaker by the second but my mind is still sharp. I'm trapped in his embrace, not even able to struggle.

He finally releases my lips, satisfied only after a long, suffocating kiss. His thin lips move down my face, trail along my jawline and quickly wrap around my ear lobe.

“Wha-what’re you doi-.” I tremble as I feel a heat rising in me, burning my skin. “Let go!”

He chuckles. “I find you much more pleasant when words aren’t coming out of your mouth.”

I’m so pissed off that I would sock him right in his pretty little face if only my hands weren’t constricted.

“Don’t you dare move.” I think he noticed my intentions. His grip tightens. “Don’t tempt me.”

I stop right away.

I sure as hell don’t want to tempt my head getting chopped off!

He comes in closer, seeing that I have fallen quiet, and watches me with an enigmatic smile.

“Oh, now you’re scared?”

Embarrassed, I stubbornly bite my lips and turn my face away, not wanting to look at him.

“I never expected a peaceful end from the moment I was captured. Still, I don’t wanna be deceived and humiliated. I don’t wanna let others toy with me as they please just to have my life spared.”

His lingering lips and his warm breath sear my neck²³. I shiver, not sure whether from the heat or the cold.

“Toy with you? Are you sure about that?” He pulls me in and whispers by my ear. “Perhaps you think I’m some lecherous, licentious prince who decided to toy with you on a whim?”

I nod cautiously, observing his reaction out of the corner of my eye.

He falls silent but still keeps eye contact with me. Light, warm breath hits my face.

We stay like that for a long time. The sun has already set and the magnificent afterglow is washing out, the moon peeking out from behind it.

The grip on my wrists disappears. He lets go of me out of nowhere and takes several steps back. The sky is cloudy, obscuring his face. It seems like his silhouette has been coated with a layer of frost. He seems a little down after the silence.

The cold wind cools my burning skin. I cough and turn my head. Cold moonlight is reflecting from the bottom of his eyes, making them seem more withdrawn than ever.

His lips curve up but he’s not smiling. “I am glad that you know how to protect yourself but it is not wise to think so little of yourself.”

Then he just turns around and disappears into the shadows. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. I heave a sigh and sit back on the fence.

Out of nowhere, a thick cape falls on my shoulders, warming my body. I don’t know when he came to stand behind me.

“You’ll catch a cold.”

A pause.

“Thanks.”



The night grows silent as the moon rises to its highest point.

I don't know why but my legs take me to where Duke Yu Qing's casket is placed before burial behind Murong Yu's back. Maybe I just wanted to see him one last time.

It's icy cold tonight. Even with this cape wrapped tightly around me, the brisk wind still finds its way in, threatening to freeze off my fingertips. It's pitch black all around. Dead silence. I have nothing to fear even if I prop myself against the casket.

I actually don't know what I should do now after the encounter with Murong Yu today. I might have thought it was nice living here before, but now I feel that I can't stay here for long either.

I bury my face in my hands, eyes tightly shut, mind a jumble. Great Rui, I can't go back there. I can't stay here long either. But neither is it going to be easy to leave. There's got to be a place where I can stay in this big, wide world!

I scoff. *Han Xin, you pitiful thing, hanging on for so long, and what do you get? Abandoned by all those closest to you. That's what you get. You're just someone who gets left behind.*

I reach for my chest; the thing underneath the fabric seems to burn.

Wind whooshes past my ears, over the trees and in between the branches and the foliage, stirring the moonlight. The leaves shake and shiver along with a miniscule turbulence.

I shake my head and call out.

"You came all the way here. Let's not be shy now. Show your face regardless of whether you're friend or foe."

¹⁶ Refers to green nephrite, a relatively common form of 'soft jade' (hard jade being jadeite). Though common, green nephrite has been a prized stone in Imperial China, nonetheless, and extensive care is required for its upkeep.

¹⁷ 昭彭 (*zhao1 peng2*), literally 'luminous Peng', Peng being a name of present day Zhongmu County, Henan, China.

¹⁸ She uses a term that literally means 'Yu older brother' when referring Murong Yu to display closeness and affection, and because it is not used this way in English, I have taken the liberty of changing it to more romantic terms (as is the effect in the Chinese text).

¹⁹ In the circumstance that there are two prime ministers at one time, the prime ministers are called 'left prime minister' and 'right prime minister', respectively. 'Left' is higher-ranking than 'right.'


²⁰ Using third-person to refer to oneself sounds cute and/or childish.

²¹ The game is known as *weiqi* in Chinese, *igo* in Japanese and *baduk* in Korean. A player tries to capture as much of the board as possible while preventing the opponent from doing the same thing by placing stones in strategic spots.

²² An eye is an empty spot adjacent to any stone. One of the only two rules of Go is that a stone must always have one eye in order to stay on the board.

²³ Specifically, the auricular sulcus.

IX: Bloodcunning

he instant I straighten up something metallic flashes from behind. I tilt my head away instinctively and the next moment I feel something cold and rigid against my neck.

“Stay still,” orders a soft yet assertive voice.

I breathe out gently in an attempt to calm my nerves. In the dark of night, I spot several phantom-like figures dressed in black. Their faces are concealed, leaving only the eyes and a shiny dagger in sight.

The person before me looks like the leader. He has his grip on a dagger, emitting an aura of death, and keeps his gaze fixed on me.

“Who are you?” he questions.

I suppress my thumping heart and stay quiet trying to come up with a reply. That they were able to get through the high security and appear here makes them formidable opponents. Are they from Yan or from...?

I don’t know whether this person is a friend or foe so there may be complications if I speak too hastily. I can’t see his face but I can make out some stiffness in his speech, with the tiniest hint of the capital’s accent.

The capital! My heart skips a beat.

My fate depends on this.

“You wouldn’t happen to know who rests in this coffin, would you?”

The next moment, the blade digs in a bit more, forcing me back, but I keep eye contact with him.

“If you have come for His Lordship, please rest assured, I am your friend.”

“How so?” He asks suspiciously.

I feel cold sweat dripping down my back but I steady my voice.

“Who doesn’t know of the duke’s honourable sacrifice? The royal family would not dare risk allowing his remains to go missing. So I’m guessing you have come to bring His Lordship back, right?”

His head tilts the slightest angle but he doesn't release his dagger. "You're bright, but unfortunately, those who know less live longer."

Hearing this, I can guess the identity of these people—most likely Wraiths, Wraiths managed by Uncle.

I know that Uncle has a group of these people who pledge their lives for the Han clan under his control. They are a formless existence. No one knows who they are, no one knows where they are, but once their master makes an order they immediately materialise and execute it with unwavering loyalty. The Han clan owes it in part to the Wraiths for their rise to power in the imperial court.

"Please, you are being emphatic. I only wanted to pay my respects to the duke for his immeasurable loyalty for his country. It would be most righteous if you can bring his honourable remains back to Great Rui."

He stays silent, observing me, making the butterflies in my stomach dance.

"I'm merely a prisoner. My life means nothing." I hold his gaze. "But this place is heavily guarded. It must not have been easy getting in. And considering you have to get out later with the duke, it wouldn't be wise to cause a commotion, now would it?"

"Are you threatening me?" His gaze is stone cold.

"I dare not." I shake my head. "I'm just calling it how I see it."

Uncle's never been one for mistakes and second chances. I'm afraid the only thing awaiting them should they fail is death.

I restrain myself from showing fear and look him straight in the eyes. His eyes shift; it appears I was right on target. It's always been my principle to not overdo anything. I've said what I needed to, now it's up to him to decide.

Moments go by as he ruminates.

"How do I know if I can trust you?"

I explain quietly. "I'm a citizen of Great Rui, captured not long ago. I was genuinely here to hold a wake for the duke. Does that make me worthy for your trust?"

He looks at me with a fixed stare which I return.

A suffocating silence wraps itself around every one of us.

Then the coldness disappears from my neck. He flicks his wrist and the dagger disappears too. He takes a few steps back, keeping me in sight.

"Open the casket!"

We're quite a distance from the camp. The Wraiths are very adept and get the duke's remains wrapped up and ready to go in no time.

"I give my thanks, though I do not know who you are," he says with his dagger in hand.

I grin. "I'm sure it is the duke's will to return to his roots²⁴. It was just a hand's turn anyway."

He doesn't respond and slowly steps away from me. The other Wraiths behind him are also backing away, ready to vanish. I feel relief watching them leave.

Suddenly there's shouting from all around. "Don't let them escape!"

I don't even have time to see what is going on when a strong gust whizzes before my face accompanied by a sharp scream.

I turn around only to see several more shadowy phantoms appearing in the darkness.

The Wraith leader barks, "Shit! It's a trap!"

Before he even finishes, everything before me whirls around at the speed of lightning. The two parties have clashed together before I can comprehend what's happening.

In the blink of an eye, dust and debris are driven up and swirl in the air, blocking my view of the situation. What was once dead silent is now filled with boisterous shouts and clangs of weapons against each other, the tranquil night nowhere to be found.

Blood splashes in all directions. War cries resonate endlessly. Flashes of metal. Criss-cross of arrowheads. Bits of crimson, scarlet and maroon seem to drift amidst the pale moonlight.

Despite being specially trained in their trade, the Wraiths are still no match for the Yan soldiers who've bathed in the blood of a hundred battles. I back away, one step at a time, as cold sweat breaks out.

Uhhhh.

Ummm.

I don't know what's going on but it's probably the best to get the hell out of here. I hunch over and make a break for it with the chaos as cover.

"Kill him! That one!" Someone yells from behind.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Something zips past my face at the same time metallic glisters fly across my vision, freezing my blood over.

It's still all around me—the yelling, the clashing of blades and clanging of metal. I don't even get two feet away before something flashes before me and a blade comes slashing down. I feel it hacking into my left shoulder as if to split me in half. Sweetness rushes into my mouth and a gush of blood sprays out. My vision goes dim. My legs are already wobbling like jelly.

The Wraith leader, covered in blood, grabs my collar. His unmasked eyes send chills down my spine.

"You almost had me there."

Then all I see is a cold icy gleam zooming down towards me. I clench my teeth and pant for air. Blood keeps welling in my mouth and spilling out, and I can't get a single word out.

I shut my eyes.

I. Am. So. Dead. This. Time.

A wisp of cool air brushes past my temple. I hear a cry of agony and smell a rusty scent. The skin on my neck feels cool for a moment. The expected bone-splitting pain doesn't come for the longest time. I hesitate and finally crack my eyes open.

The Wraith's eyes are almost popping out of their sockets. His face is one of disbelief while a wolf-tooth white-feathered arrow sticks out from his forehead. Blood trickles down his face, making the picture all the more ghastly.

"C'mere!"

I whip around to see Murong Yu standing there with an austere expression, arrow nocked. The sound of battle is showing no signs of ceasing and the smell of iron only thickens. He strides over with one arm stretched out. My mind is blank as I reach out, arm shuddering. Quicker than lightning, the Wraith leader rises up, and a stretch of silver light, more brilliant than the moon, carves into the ink black night. Murong Yu draws his sword and blood showers down like rain. The man's head goes flying. I try to keep it down but another mouthful of blood comes rushing out. The headless body tips backwards. His surprisingly strong grip tears my collar off and a white object slips out, tumbling on to the ground. Oh no! It fell! I immediately reach out for it but Murong Yu steps in front, sword raised, and pulls me towards him. "Let me go." I only have that white object in mind. He looks at me sternly and pulls me in closer. The wound on my shoulder widens. The thick smell of blood rushes to my head and a dizzy spell hits me. I cannot lose it. I cannot... "What're you doing?" He warns lowly near my ears and pulls me in even closer. "You're gonna get yourself killed!" I shake my head wildly. "No. I can't lose it." He frowns, impatience flashing in his eyes. "Now is not the time!" Before he could even finish, I spot a shadowy figure rushing straight at us with a sword in hand, looking like a shapeless shadow in the night and bringing along with it a gust of wind. "Watch out!" Caught off guard, I shove Murong Yu aside without thinking. A cold draft blows by my ears. Then darkness drops over me.



“Enough! Enough!”

Xiao Qinyun purses her lips, looking all unwilling. “Quit complaining. I wouldn’t even be doing this if my darling Yu didn’t ask me to.”

Spasms of pain run through my shoulders. I’m wrapped up like a mummy but I’m still racked with pain, like the marrow is being pulled out of my bones. I’m really not in the mood to deal with this little girl but I can only put on a smile and ask her politely to leave.

She places her hands on her slender waist and twirls around, smiling mischievously. “Having a duchess deliver medicine is not something you’re worthy of, but on the account that you saved my dear Yu... I’ll be the bigger person this time!”

I chuckle wryly. I don’t even know why I instinctively shoved him away and took the blow for no good reason. Who knows how long I’m going to be stuck in bed this time.

I don’t know why but I have to admit—I guess I just don’t want to see him die or get hurt.

Watching her smile while I lean slantwise on my pillow, I only have one thought going through my mind.

Why such goddamn lousy luck?

“My sweet Yu only got some small injuries. The doctor said he’ll recover in no time.” She beams and claps. “I just know nothing would ever happen to my dear Yu.”

‘My darling.’ ‘My sweetie.’ If I were him, I could probably make a living selling the cheese from all her lovey-doveyness.

“If there’s nothing else, Duchess, please leave.” I point to the door, ignoring the pain. “This is not a place for a royal lady.”

She sits on the edge of the bed as though I haven’t spoken a word. Looking earnestly, she says, “I shall reward you, purely on the account that you saved him. Say your wish, and it shall be granted.”

I pause, an idea forming as I watch her cheerful face.

Entering and exiting the camp should be no problem for a duchess. And I doubt Murong Yu could do anything if I talk her into taking me out and manage to ditch her somewhere.

Once the plan became clear, I take a breath to talk but just as I do I grunt in pain. The wounds that appeared to have healed has split open again, and a piercing pain runs through my body.

Seeing me bent over coughing seems to unsettle her deeply.

“Han Xin! Han Xin! Are you alright? Does it still hurt? Should I get the doctor?”

It feels like the wound has been fully opened again. The white bandages are dyed crimson in an instant. I gasp and clench my jaw.

“I’m fine.” I shake my hand.

She hands me the medicine with a concerned look. “Are you sure? You don’t look too well.”

I take it and open it for a sniff. “Smells like quality stuff, though.”

“Well, of course. I brought the best medicine for my brave Yu.” She looks down, her lashes faintly quivering. Her perky nose looks cute from this angle.

“This is all from the Imperial Palace of Yan. You definitely got the long end of the stick this time.”

“Really?” I grin as I play with the bottle. “Then I must give you my thanks, Duchess.”

She looks satisfied one moment but then she puts on a serious face. “Hey, you haven’t told me what you want yet.”

I chuckle amusingly before answering. "I'll come right out and say it if you so insist, Duchess." I sit straighter. "His Highness has kept me on a leash ever since I came here and I'm dying from boredom. I'd love it if you could take me out sometime to have some fun."

Her eyes go wide and she jumps towards me. "Fun, you say? There's fun stuff around here?"

I nod. "It might be a military base now but there are towns nearby. That being said, I doubt there'll be fairs at times like these."

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" Her delicate brows knit together. "My sweetie is always so serious that I'm bored out of my mind."

"I might consider being nicer if you would keep to yourself."

I jump out of my skin, and even Xiao Qinyun lets out a yelp of surprise.

Murong Yu steps through the door, unfazed, and gives her a cold look as he approaches. She scurries back to the open door and flashes a quick smile before running out with her train in hand.

I'm not sure whether to laugh or feel pity for this girl who's so full of beans. I wonder when she'll settle down a little. Judging by his temper, I'm afraid he would only find a patient, generous lady to his liking.

"Why're you smiling? I doubt getting injured is something worthy of a smile."

Removing my gaze from the door, I see him already sitting on the bed with his brows furrowed discontentedly.

Holding the bottle, I shake my head. "O'course it's not. But it's already a thing of the past, what more can I do now?"

His gaze softens and he pauses before asking. "Are you feeling better?"

I nod. "It wasn't too deep. I'll probably be back on my feet in a few days. Oh yeah," I point to him. "The duchess said you're injured too."

He shakes his head. "It's nothing," he replies nonchalantly.

Then he turns to me. "Take your medicine. I got her to bring it all the way here anyway."

I shake the nephrite bottle²⁵. I can make out faint round shapes rolling inside through the thin, white walls. I twist open the lid and herbal scents waft out. I toss a few into my mouth. Bitter. Bleh. Whatever. I'm used to it by now after eating more medicine than proper food these days.

I feel his grim gaze tracing my face.

"Why did you go there? Instead of sleeping?" He asks sharply.

Spotting his darkening mood, I quickly gulp down the medicine.

"I was just there to keep vigil for the duke! Don't take it the wrong way. I'm not one of them."

He continues observing me and I quickly change the subject.

"What happened to them in the end? What about the duke?"

"Only a few got away. They would have all died if I wasn't so tied up."

I let out a light sigh, not sure how to feel about it. The Yan soldiers obviously had the upper hand from what I remember and Murong Yu isn't the type to let them off the hook so easily. So...

"What's on your mind?" he gently asks as he tilts my chin up.

I shudder and pull back, but he only grins, unperturbed.

“I’ve said many times, Your Highness.” I swat his hand away, frustrated. “Please be mindful of your actions.”

His brows arch up. “You don’t have any right to ask that of me. Don’t forget that you still owe me.”

I shake my head and uncover my shirt.

“Not anymore, I don’t think so.” I point to the blood-stained bandage on my left shoulder.

His face turns gloomy and his brows knit together once more. “Are you going to tell me that that’s why you saved me?”

I tentatively tilt my head. It happened so quickly that there was no time to think anything over, let alone consider the debt I owe him. I only pushed him away out of instinct.

He’s staring so intently that I feel like he’ll swallow me up if I don’t give him a satisfying reply.

I purse my lips. “Well, are you gonna deny it? If it wasn’t for me-.”

He scoffs but his cool fingers are already caressing my face. They slowly move downwards, towards my lips, and gently wipe away the residue of herbs at the corners.

“You’re so naive.” He speaks slowly and lightly but I can hear every sound clearly. “For thinking you can wipe the slate clean just like that. I’ll make sure you never do.”

He rushes forth and traps me on the bed. I snap my head to the side and I feel my shoulder ripping open again.

Pain. Shooting through my limbs no matter how much I try to stay still. I painstakingly push my arm against his chest but he grabs it and pulls it aside. My arm is aching and beyond useless which aggravates me more.

I see his eyes trailing down from my face to my chest—my shirt has come undone, baring my shoulders.

His breathing seems to quicken.

I take the opportunity and jab my elbow into his chest. *Whump*. He shoots back like a spring. He squints, as if in pain, and freezes. I’m panting for air when I notice his frown and tightly clipped lips. It seems like he’s trying very hard to hold something in.

The two of us stay in that position, our breaths the only sounds that can be heard. He looks worse by the minute. Colour is draining out of his face and small beads of sweat pool on his forehead.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” I ask quietly.

He bites down on his lips and pulls air through them, his body shaking like crazy.

Wh-what’s wrong with him?

Could it be...

I don’t know how I got the strength to but I snap up and rip his shirt open. What I see gives me a fright. His chest is bound by white bandages with red spots mixed in here and there. I can pick out some dark red scabs on his clear skin. His undershirt has been stained dark red too.

“You-!” I whip my head up.

He coughs and pulls his clothes back.

“What the hell is this?” I demand. “I thought you said ‘nothing’?”

I reach for his collar but he catches my hand. “I thought you said you don’t owe me anymore. Why the concern?”

Tongue-tied, I’m not sure whether to pull my hand back or grab his collar. My hand stays frozen in midair and I don’t even notice that he had my hand in his.

“Could it be that you don’t want to see me die?” He smirks amusingly.

Then I realise he’s playing with me. And at a time like this.

He leisurely straightens his clothes out before fixing mine. I shudder when his cold fingertips scrape across my skin.

I clear my throat. “Did those people do that?”

He flashes a fleeting smile.

“And you said you’re clear of your debt. I guess not.” He points to his own chest. “You know how I got this?”

I shake my head. He simply kicks off his boots before sitting cross-legged across from me.

“Didn’t you drop something that night? I wanted to get it back for you because it seemed really important to you. Then before I knew it, all this happened.”

I peer at him dubiously. How is it even possible that he’d do that for me?

“But,” he sighs. “Someone was faster than me. Took it and whisked away without a trace.”

I can only feel disappointed hearing his words.

“So, what was it?”

“A jade pendant,” I casually answer. “It’s the only thing I have of my parents.”

“Oh.” He pauses, his composure wilting. “No wonder. I had thought...it was a love-token.”

His voice gets quieter and quieter but his face says delight.

“Huh?” I ask, puzzled. “How did you get that? Idiot.”

“No way. I refuse to believe that a man your age doesn’t have one.”

“Hmmpf. I ain’t like you. Got all the noble ladies of Yan jumping into your arms, and tons of love tokens lying around.” I wiggle my brows. “Even got Duchess Xiao chasing after you all the way from the capital.”

“Xiao Qinyun?” His brow arches up. “That silly girl? I can’t even bear to look at her.”

I lie back on my pillow and chide absentmindedly. “Now, that’s not nice of you. She went through all the trouble of making you pastries but you don’t even appreciate it. Not to mention you’re bad-mouthing her. She’ll be heartbroken.”

“You think that she can ‘make’ food? You mean ‘eat’, right?” His mouth scrunches up in disgust. “I didn’t die from the rock-hard army rations back when we were trapped in the desert, but when I ate her pastries I actually thought I was a goner.”

I burst out laughing after seeing his grumpy expression. I clap him on the back empathetically. He starts laughing too. He looks up with his head against the wall and straightens his legs. His eyes flutter shut.

“Han Xin?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you have a girl back home?” He looks at me.

I think about it for a moment. “Nope.”

“It’s not that I haven’t been with one.” I add after seeing his wondrous expression. “If I said I haven’t gone to the red-light districts, now I wouldn’t even believe that myself. But there hasn’t been one I truly liked.”

“Why not?”

Hearing these words, I get a tight knot in my stomach.

All the desperation and challenges I’ve had to face has somehow made it impossible for me to trust anyone. Not my closest family. Not my dearest friends. Or my most respected colleagues. It’s hard for me to express emotions and trust human relationships.

“I dunno. Maybe it’s my experiences as a kid. I can’t trust a person with all my heart so naturally I can’t truly like a person.”

His gaze draws away after a bit and he sighs.

“I remember, when I was about fifteen, Father bestowed upon me a concubine.” He looks straight out the open door. “She was an excellent cook but I was always too afraid to eat what she made.”

“Afterwards,” he recalls coolly with a grin, “Things happened and it turned out she was working for the imperial noble consort. Fortunately, Lady Luck was on my side. So I guess I’m kind of like you in a way.”

My stomach tightens uneasily as I eye his striking silhouette. I look up after a short silence to meet with his gaze. No words as our four eyes stay connected.

I purse my lips and then flash a smile. “I still have to thank you even though you didn’t get the pendant back for me.”

His body tenses before he glances up and studies my face. I maintain my gentle smile. Something unusual glistens in his eyes and his lips curve upwards. They form a good-looking arc that radiates joyfulness.

We chat about some random stuff for a while, and soon I start feeling sleepy. I nudge him several times.

“Go away. I’mma sleep. It’s too squishy with you here.”

“I’m sleepy too.” He mumbles lazily. “I don’t wanna go.”

“C’mom, scram.”

I gather my blankets and roll into a comfy position. Just as I’m about to meet the Sandman, however, an icy draft sneaks in and makes me shiver. I look up to see Murong Yu lifting the blanket.

“What’re you doing?”

“Sleeping.” His eyes flash with mischief.

“Go back to your own room.” I glare at him. “This bed’s too small for two.”

I reach out for my blanket but he takes hold of my hand.

“What?” He rolls his eyes. “Are you kicking me out?”

“I like sleeping alone!”

He hangs on to the blanket, unwilling to let go. “Why does it seem like you’re playing hard to get?”

I choke on my own spit.

What the hell is this guy thinking? He has a humongous bed but he wants to squish in here with me. Even if he is too tired, it’s only a few steps away from here. If looks could kill, he’d be pushing up daisies.

I let go and roll to the other side of the bed. “Fine! It’s just two men sleeping on the same bed. I ain’t scared of you.”

He snickers and lies down. I can’t care less about him so I turn my back to him and wrap the blanket around myself. I feel drowsy almost right away.

It’s too squishy.

But then again, it’s not that bad being all warm and cozy either.

²⁴ A metaphor for returning to origin after death. It is important for one to do so in China, if not, as it is believed, one’s spirits may become roaming ghosts.

²⁵ White nephrite is known as ‘mutton fat white jade’ in Chinese, is especially prized for its rare white colour and hardness, and was comparable in its value to diamonds in Imperial China. White nephrite was used to make royal stamps in the Han Dynasty.

X: Quiting

Day ten of the ninth lunar month. Marquis Xin Ping²⁶, Marquis An Ding²⁷ and Duke of Yun Ning²⁸ gathered an army of thirty thousand strong at Long Liang²⁹ Brook. Murong Yu divided fifty thousand men into three Wings, and cornered and trapped the Rui troops.

Day fourteen of the ninth lunar month. Long Liang Brook fell. Marquis Xin Ping died in battle. Marquis An Ding was critically wounded. Duke of Yun Ning escaped. Murong Yu's vanguards rode into and took the county of great import, Peng Ze³⁰, cutting off the Rui capital from the north.

Day twenty of the ninth lunar month. Marshal Heng arrived at the capital. All court officials fell to their knees in his wake. Eighty thousand men set camp forty *li* away from the capital. The remaining forty thousand advanced north.

Day twenty-seven of the ninth lunar month. The County of Qing Hua³¹ succumbed to the Right Wing of Murong Yu's army and Duke of Yun Ning's troops were ambushed at Fen³² Hill Gorge. The brutal battle lasted two days and nights. Zhou Zhenluan, faraway in South Hill Pass, was not able to come to the rescue. Duke of Yun Ning died in battle. Great Yan took control of the province of Ford's Field, leaving the capital wide-open to the west.

Day twenty-nine of the ninth lunar month. Marshal Heng's troops arrived at South Hill Pass and set up camp within. General Zhou Zhenluan led his men to guard the western path only to run into the Yan's Left Wing army and engage in a bloody battle in a canyon. Casualties piled high on both sides. Great Rui retreated back into the Pass.

South Hill Pass, a strategic choke point that formed the last guard for Great Rui, lay exposed and vulnerable before the cavalry of Yan. With the capital within sight, Murong Yu needed only to be patient in order to penetrate through to it.



I witness the glory that is Murong Yu's army once again.

The three Wings of his army, with their spears raised, stand row upon row before the platform and roar to the sky in formation. The thundering war drums. The blazing signal fires. The picture is one of burning magnificence. Murong Yu steps on to the general's platform, his cape billowing wildly in the winds of the North. He slowly raises his dazzling white sword to the brilliant skies of the frontiers. Sunlight strikes down on his armour and ivory-white helmet like a sharp blade. His ink-black warhorse lets out a wild neigh as it rears up. Murong Yu quickly turns to the other direction, red-tassel spear in hand, and directs his steed around. The cavalry trails like thunder behind him, kicking up a sandstorm. The earth below seems to shake and bellow in ire.

I watch them recede like waves to the distance from a tower and heave a deep sigh. I'm not sure what I feel right now. I turn to leave only to hear quick and sporadic footsteps behind me as I descend.

"Careful." I peer out the corner of my eye. "You might trip."

I hear giggles. "Nuh-uh. I always do this on the steps in the palace and I've never tripped."

Xiao Qinyun jumps out from behind me. Her sapphire blue dress makes her skin appear fair and goes well with her complexion.

"And even if I do." She tilts her head. "You'd catch me, so I've got nothing to worry about."

I smile awkwardly, not sure how to respond to that.

Murong Yu was already in a stormy mood several days ago, and then she broke the last straw with all her mischief so he decided to punish her. She was terrified. Seeing that, I couldn't just watch so I ended up being the mediator. Not long after, she has learned to come to me for help whenever she gets into trouble.

"Please try to behave while his highness isn't present. If you get into trouble again, I'm afraid even I'll get punished."

"I forbid any mentioning of him!" She interrupts me, stomping furiously. "It's driving me nuts. He doesn't let me go anywhere! I'm bored to tears."

I shrug as if to say 'There's nothing you can do.' How could you let a little girl out at a time of war? Murong Yu would most likely be the one that the Left Prime Minister would blame if anything went wrong.

She suddenly starts giggling. "Didn't you say there are towns nearby? Since my darling Yu's not here anyways, let's go on an adventure!"

I almost choke on my own spit hearing this. In my opinion, it would be best—the best—to just wrap her up and send her back to the Yan capital.

"Come on, please?" She grabs my arm and starts shaking it.

"My Duchess," I frown and pull my arm away. "It's not terribly safe outside the camp. Please don't make it harder for me than it already is. Not to mention, I'm merely a prisoner after all—rumours might spread if you act like this."

She pouts unhappily and sticks her nose up in the air.

"I don't care what you Rui people do, but interaction between the sexes has never been taboo for us. And a prisoner, you say?" Her brows arch up in a devious way. "Han Xin, I order you to go to the stable and prepare a horse to accompany me on an outing!"

I didn't expect her to say such a thing but in the end I can't do anything even if I wanted to. Beggars can't be choosers. I'm not so dumb that I can't see that the odds are against me. So I choose to put up with it.

She laughs when I don't respond and hurries off towards the stable. I shake my head and race after her. Murong Yu has taken his men to the battlefield, leaving only a small fraction here. He had told me to keep my eye on her and make sure she stays put.

"Hurry, Han Xin!"

"Be quiet or the whole camp's going to know that the duchess is going out!"

She shoots me a hard look before turning back to the horses. I glance at them and put my fingers in between my lips and blow. *Shrill*. All the horses stamp their hooves and look towards me. Xiao Qinyun looks at me, shocked.

"It'd be best if you got changed, my Duchess," I suggest as I untie two horses. "You're too noticeable."

First change. I shake my head.

"This won't do, my Duchess. You're going on an outing-in-disguise³³, not a blind date."

She has on a cream-coloured ruqun that shows off her slender figure and luxuriant hair. Pearls and emeralds clink against rings and pendants. Hearing my comment, she glares at me before stomping back to her room.

Second change. I don't even bother saying anything this time. I just shake my head.

Crimson dress. Less jewelry this time. But that just makes her natural beauty stand out all the more.

Third change. I'm leaning against the wall and shaking my head with my eyes closed.

"What do you want from me!" She yells, frustrated.

"It's not me. Even if you're wearing servant's clothing, it's all top quality brocade. Anyone with working eyes could tell you're not a commoner. Hurry and change."

"I don't know how. You tell me what to do."

I sigh. Only after I pick out a plain green cotton dress and get her to put her hair down in two braids do I nod in satisfaction.

"Now, much better. A normal looking girl."

"So...ugly..." She whines as she tugs on the dress.

"There's a war right now. There are people who'll kidnap any pretty lady they see on the street. I'm not helping you if you get kidnapped."

"Wait, why would they do that?"

"To sell them to the army as prostitutes³⁴, of course."

Her expression becomes one of disbelief and horror. I pass one of the reins to her.

"Don't worry. Dressed like that, no one will."

As for what I'm wearing, it's so average it can't be anymore average. Duh, this outing is my chance to escape. This way I won't be standing out in any crowd.

"By the way, you can't keep calling me 'hey' anymore."

"Why not?" she asks.

"Because we're sneaking out, which means you're not a duchess once you leave the camp."

"Then what should I call you?"

I rub my chin, peering at her from the corner of my eye. "Call me 'big brother'³⁵. Since you're younger than me."

Expectedly, she's reluctant.

"Fine. Suit yourself. But don't come running for help when someone tries to snatch you."

Her eyes go wide. "Fine...Big brother," she finally murmurs.

"That's more like it." I chuckle and mount one of the horses.

The setting sun stains the limestone pavement a sparkling gold. The sky darkens bit by bit, making it appear bleak and gloomy. We're strolling along on the streets with our horses. The pedestrians who pass us by all seem dispirited.

I sigh deeply. I suppose it's not unusual for the commoners to show distress from the war.

I follow Xiao Qinyun to a street performer's booth. The trainer looks disheartened while the small monkey keeps climbing up and down and jumping back and forth. Xiao Qinyun claps and cheers, appearing thoroughly amused by it. I study my surroundings and my spirits get dampened.

These streets were still bustling with liveliness when I first came here with General Zhou. In the busiest parts of the city, the sidewalks were brightly lit and it was simply a sea of faces. But now, it's more bare and emptier than ever.

What used to be is no more³⁶.

"Hey, come back down to earth."

She's pulling on my sleeve when I snap out of it. "Brother, look, isn't that monkey funny?"

I throw a fake smile. She ducks down again and starts playing with the monkey. Her eyes become thin, curvy lines as she laughs freely.

Bored, the trainer and I start chatting.

"I still got a wife and kid to look after. We might've been poor, but that said, life was secure." He sighs as he shakes his head. "Business hasn't been good either since the war broke out."

"What're your plans then, mister?" I ask after glancing at Xiao Qinyun. Looks like she's having fun.

"What can I do? Take my wife and kid with me and beg? I dunno."

The energy seeps away from his face. "It wouldn't have had to come down to this if I had my land. Rich bastards took mine away long time ago, along with my bread."

What can I say? It's not like the Rui bureaucrats had only recently started indulging in this corrupt, greedy behaviour.

I pull Xiao Qinyun up and take out a silver penny from my breast pocket for the trainer. His eyes instantly light up and he bows while repeating his gratitude. I walk away without sparing him another glance.

I'm studying the streets, trying to figure out the best escape route, when I feel weight on my arms. I turn to see Xiao Qinyun hanging on to me.

"There's no fair today," she sighs. "I thought it'd be more fun around here."

She touches the small bundle hanging off of the saddle—naught but cosmetics and perfumes, potpourri and purses, things that girls like.

The remaining sun is falling to the west, painting the blue sky red and displaying its last rays of brilliance.

I look up at the sky and say to her, "It's getting late, my duchess. Let's go back."

She gazes all around before she points at a restaurant not far up ahead. She turns around and beams at me.

"I'm hungry, brother. Let's go after some food." She whines while shaking my arm. "Brother. But I'm hungry! Brother..."

What can I do? This girl proves to be too much for me.

The owner tells us with an apologetic look that a lot of the menu is unavailable now, what with the war going on and all. After much thought he brings over some freshly-fried pancakes with some sauce, green onions and even a bottle of liquor. Spotting her unimpressed expression, I merely shrug. She frowns as she eyes the food in front of us while I've already started digging in. Some sauce, a pinch of onion, and I roll it up before stuffing it in. She follows my lead hesitantly.

"Say, Han Xin, where did you learn how to whistle like that?" She's taking big bites as well now. I guess she finds it passable.

I snicker. "Why? You don't think I should be able to?"

"No," she puts down her cup. "I mean, aren't the Rui soldiers third-rate? I was just surprised, is all."

I almost choke on the alcohol I had in my mouth. I cough as I shoot her a glare. "No matter what, I am still a soldier!"

The dryness of the alcohol hits me in my chest. I chuckle and wiggle my fingers. "Do you know what the palace guards are called in Yan?"

She takes a sip out of her own cup. "Of course. Imperial Guards."

"We have palace guards in Great Rui, too, but they're called Golden Guardians, not Imperial Guards." I pour more into my cup and take a sip. "I used to be one before I came here. It's not that strange for a palace guard, is it?"

Her eyes are out on stalks. "H-how could a slacker like you be an I-Imperial Guard?!"

"Couldn't tell, huh?" I down my drink with a smile. "This is what you call 'a wise head makes a closed mouth'."

"Psh. Don't get in over your head." She purses her lips. "You do nothing all day long. I see no skill at all. I don't buy it."

I smile, not trying to argue with her.

Most of the sons of concubines from elite and aristocratic families look to be promoted to the Golden Guardians, not just because the job is relatively easier but also because wages are much higher than any other armed forces. Not to mention, you could get closer to other elites and even the royal family. I've always lived under someone else's roof and no one had worried about my future for me, so perhaps the empress dowager only got me in the Golden Guardians after I came across her mind out of the blue. With that said, being the kind of guy with zero background, zero support, whom no one gives a damn about, I've taken my fair share of bad treatment in that place.

Thinking about that shit brings a sour taste in my mouth, so I wash it down with another cup.

Her face is getting redder and redder. Soon she is sprawled on the table and her eyes have become unfocused.

"Brother, ha-have you noticed? You're ac-actually pretty good-looking."

I almost let a mouthful of wine spray out.

How many people have I heard that from? I mean, I only think I look decent for a guy. As for whether I'm good-looking or not, I've never thought about it. I guess I've known that people had always liked my face ever since I was a kid. I remember when the empress dowager's lady's maid, Xiu, saw me, her eyes had brimmed with tears and she kept repeating: 'Indeed, they're alike.'

My mother, the empress dowager's own niece, was apparently the most beautiful woman in all of Great Rui. Sadly, I don't remember anything about her from the memories of my first nine years of life. After I grew up, I got accustomed to those various stares. I hate it when people talk about my appearance, but I'm not one bit bothered hearing it from this drunk girl.

"My dear Yu's good-looking... Smart an' elegant...I wonder who'd be...better looking, you or him?"

She starts tearing up. "Yu, h-he always treats me like a child... He has endless important stuff t' attend to an' every time I go lookin' for 'im...h-he's always impatient...an' makes me leave."

I sip some more alcohol and then help her wipe her tears with the handkerchief by her hand. She suddenly sits up straight and looks straight at me.

"I've the feeling th-that...he treats you better than me."

My hand trembles and the cup of liquor spills on to the ground.

She must really be drunk! Just look at her and all this nonsense.

"Last time...you got hurt by the assassins...He looked after you for so long...He's always so distant...He's never treated me like that."

Disappointed, I sigh. No luck today. I doubt my escape plan will turn out successful with her drunk like this.

The sky is almost completely dark when I look outside. Lights have been lit here and there.

Swigs of booze. Mouthfuls of pancake. Xiao Qinyun starts wobbling back and forth. She's sitting properly, of course—I'm afraid I have drunk more than I can handle.

I try to pull her up after paying, but I didn't think she would be too drunk to even get up.

"Brother, I don't wanna go. Sleep...I wanna sleep," she mutters before falling asleep.

Wow. I was right. If only I knew, I wouldn't have let her drink.

Her childish face is a flushed red under the lanterns. I chuckle as I shake my head and hoist her up into my arms. Only after I get to our horses do I realise she can barely sit up on her own. After some thought, I decide the only way is to ride together and I tie the other horse to us. She seems to be very comfortable. She shifts around in my arms and goes back to sleep again after burying her face in my shirt. I slow our pace.

The night's getting dark as we get further from the town and closer to camp. I look up to catch a glimpse of the moon peeking behind the treetops.

The sky darkens even more and I quicken our pace. She is sleeping well in my arms, her breaths even. Her long lashes seem to refract the moonlight. When I look up again I can already see the torches in camp.

She will probably be fine if I let her go the rest of the way alone. There's another horse I can disappear off into the distance without any-.

Before that thought even finishes, a chill creeps through my body. My eyes go wide as I look around alarmingly. It's quiet as usual. But my senses are heightened to a frightening point—I felt death just now, yes, like the aura that a sword unsheathed reveals.

Our steed seems to have detected something as well. Its ears flick up cautiously as it slows down. The one behind us also whinnies. My right hand goes to my sword hilt; my other holds on tighter to Xiao Qinyun.

The camp lies before my eyes, but it's no longer flat plains around us. Shrubs cover the small, uneven hillocks. Their branches and leaves shake along with the night winds, as if a wild beast is lurking in the dark, ready to leap out at any moment.

My palms become clammy. I hold my breath and push forward.

Wheesh. Something zips through the air and I feel it coming for my head. I swerve to the side only to see a white shape flit before my eyes. Cold sweat breaks out.

People!

I tug on the reins and the horse starts galloping forth like greased lightning. I turn around and spot several metallic reflections within the darkness aiming straight for us. My grip tightens around her waist. She suddenly wakes up and grumbles.

"Wha-why're you holdin' on so tight?"

"Duck!"

No time for explanations. I press her down on the saddle and lash the horse.

All of a sudden, I hear deafening pounding of horse hooves from behind. I glance sideways: several dozen cavalries have leapt out from the bushes and are racing towards us. Before I know it, one is already brandishing his sword mere feet away. I draw my own and deflect his, and then I stab it into his chest with a backhand strike. A fountain of red instantly gushes out. I yank my sword out and that man tumbles off his horse. I look back again. The rest are still a distance away but it doesn't seem as though they're going to give up chase anytime soon.

If only we get to camp! The camp!

The horse's hooves hasten with every step, weaving around shrubs and weeds. Wind whistles by; I can still feel the warm blood on the tip of my nose. I grip the reins, my body tense like a board. Xiao Qinyun is right up against my chest, not attempting another look.

I can see the camp gates now, but just as I am about to whip the horse, flames spring to life and thick black smoke rises up, concealing the sky and the moon and the entire camp!

A trap!

Just as I had thought, another few dozen cavalries burst out from the camp gates all wielding broadswords. I clench my jaw and wrench the reins around. The horse neighs and turns. We're caught between countless flashing blades. I push aside a spear that was aimed at my horse with a backhand, dig my heels into the horse's stomach and hurdle out of danger's reach.

The brisk wind and a wider field of vision drive quite a bit of my drunkenness away.

Murong Yu had only left five hundred of his elites behind. Judging by the looks of it, these deadly warriors have long killed every one of the five hundred. Furthermore, their goal isn't simply to kill. Coming to this conclusion, my eyes snap down to the girl in my arms.

Xiao Qinyun! Daughter of a high-ranking official of Yan. Grandniece of the empress dowager. Fiancée of Murong Yu.

This makes perfect sense now. It doesn't matter whose plan this is, as long as they have her, Murong Yu cannot do a single thing no matter how courageous or able he is.

How cunning!

I gaze around. The erratic drumming of hooves disturbs the silent night. I don't know how many are giving chase. The next thing I realise, one has already caught up. I can even see the moonlight reflecting off of his spear. I reach down the horse's side and nock an arrow in a moment's notice. I aim at that horse. I can even see its rider's face.

Closer and closer. Closer. Closer.

I clench my jaw but my fingers won't release the arrow.

The men on those horses, they might be soldiers of Rui. My countrymen.

Xiao Qinyun is still a child, a child that grew up on praise and doting. There is no reason for her to get involved in a man's war. But! I cannot attack a fellow countryman. I...

I close my eyes and open them after a moment.

There's no turning back now!

I release my fingers. *Twang*. The arrow shoots away. The horse neighs with all its might before collapsing to the ground. Its rider gets up without a single injury and charges towards us.

The warhorse under us rears up and neighs wildly before galloping away like the wind.

"Stop! Stop right there!"

I hear them yelling at the top of their lungs. The earth itself seems to quake under their horses' hooves. I bend forward, lining my body parallel to the ground, just as several metal arrows fly over me. My back is soaked with sweat but I can only thrash the horse to go faster, faster, and faster.

"What's going on?" She chews her lips, her wide eyes shining in the dark while her face is deadly pale.

“Quiet.” I hiss as I look back again. “I’m not sure if I can lose them but I do know this area better than they do.”

She grabs onto my shirt and buries her face in my chest. Her shoulders are shaking.

“No tears. Come, now.”

A gust of wind comes from behind as I quietly comfort her, making her retreat further into my embrace.

One man has nearly caught up to us, approaching with increasing speed. I push myself up to see a man with a broad frame eyeing us with a majestic sword in hand. I sense death once more.

“Gimme the girl,” he orders.

I shake my head, determined, and continue to lash the horse.

“I only want the girl. Your life’s worth nothing to me. Save yourself the trouble.”

I scoff. “Like you said, she’s merely a girl. What could’ve possibly made you come for her at this hour?”

He edges closer. “You won’t give her to me because you know very well yourself what that is. I might consider letting you go if you cooperate though.”

I glance back at the men pursuing us. “I honestly didn’t expect a soldier under Marshal Heng to say such things.”

His expression becomes full of murderous intent as he studies me. I rush the horse forth, and he follows suit. Seconds become minutes. I sense the horse’s breathing falling out of rhythm and I start panicking. We speed through the bushes, shaking and rattling everything in our wake like the wind.

I must go and find Murong Yu if I don’t want to die now,.

But, we’re still some distances away...

Goddammit! Why?

The land flattens out before me. The hillocks extend into a spread of endless grassland that provides no cover at all. I charge head first against the brisk night wind, my body high-strung and my mind even more so.

“You’re not gettin’ away!” The man barks as he swings his weapon.

Our two blades collide in midair, and the harsh clank resonates sharply in the night. I look past the swords into his cold-blooded face. Our swords slice the air and cast eerie rays of light. The blade tips flick about, aiming for all the critical body parts.

He takes a swing that I dodge, but unexpectedly he turns his wrist and quickly cuts back. Too fast to dodge, it slices into my right arm and blood trickles down. He immediately follows up with another strike. I hold on to Xiao Qinyun and the reins with one arm and fend off his attacks with my wounded right. I feel my wrists tiring out with every block. The next thing I know his blade is coming towards me. I feel beads of sweat dripping down my face as I watch it getting closer and closer.

“Hold on!” I murmur. She nods.

I squeeze the horse tight with my legs and it leaps high into the air. I clash swords with him and both of our swords fly up into the air.

“You-!”

At once, the bristling wind overwhelms all other sounds.

I don’t know how long we’ll last either even if the horse sprints at full speed. I only know one step forward means more probability of survival. That man wouldn’t have let me go even if I had obediently handed Xiao Qinyun to them.

The warhorse is starting to pant irregularly and its speed decreases. I see the men behind me catching up.

Faster!

Faster!

More!

A sharp noise sounds from behind.

The next thing I know, pain racks my back, the ‘thump’ of an arrowhead digging into flesh clearly audible. My body tips forward from the momentum and I almost slip off the horseback. I cling on to Xiao Qinyun and the reins with my hands. I don’t dare to let go. I feel things brushing past my temples. My back is pierced once more. I can’t anymore. Blood surge past my lips. I’m knocked back and forth from the bumpy ride. Warm fluids flow down my back. I catch the sight of two feathered arrows sticking out of my back from the corner of my eye.

I feel like jelly. My eyelids droop down. My vision dims. I feel my conscious slipping.

“Remember, don’t bother with me should I fall. Keep heading east. Go find His Highness...”

I don’t know what I said after that.

I only see a few flickers of fire in the distance.

I only faintly hear some sounds of combat.

The pain from my back. It’s already numb—so numb there’s no more pain.

²⁶ 信平 (*xin4 ping2*), literally ‘trustworthy peace’.

²⁷ 安定 (*an1 ding4*), literally ‘tranquil stability’.

²⁸ 昀寧 (*yun2 ning2*), literally ‘serene sun light’.

²⁹ 隴涼 (*long3 liang2*), Long is a name for present day Gansu Province, and Liang was the name of several states that were all situated in Gansu during the Sixteen Kingdoms era.

³⁰ 彭澤 (*peng2 ze2*), literally ‘grace of Peng’.

³¹ 清樺 (*qing1 hua4*), literally ‘clear birch’.

³² 汾 (*fen2*), a river in present day Shaanxi.

³³ A person’s social status could be told from their attire and sometimes certain colours were only allowed to be adorned by certain people, so members of the royal family had to dress in disguise if they wished to not be identified.

³⁴ Previously translated as army hostess.

³⁵ Not related in any way to George Orwell’s Big Brother.

³⁶ Comes from a line from the poem 武陵春 (*wu3 ling2 chun1*) by Li Qingzhao (1084 – 1155), literally meaning ‘physical objects remain the same, humans do not.’ This poem conveys how powerless humans are in the face of time.

XI: Concupiscence

My world flips upside down. I fall off the horse and smash into the ground. The cloud of sand and dust that I knock up makes it even harder for me to open my eyes. Hooves whip past me, creating a blast of wind.

“Kill!” I hear someone roaring beside me.

Bellowing shouts and wild neighs become jumbled together along with the clashes of swords and spears, sounding especially loud in the peaceful night.

Something weighs down on me out of nowhere and pushes the arrowheads fractions deeper. Pain shoots through me. I groan and open my eyes. I buckle around, trying to dislodge it.

I raise my head only to see the faint shapes of horse hooves brushing past me.

So heavy.

Who is it?

Who?

My vision goes black. Blood rushes into my mouth. I try to hold it in but it sprays out.

The deadly blades give rise to a violent storm. Screams and whinnies echo in the whistling wind.

My vision blurs in and out. I can't quite think anymore. I'm just in so much pain from the weight on me. My backside is slick and slippery; I think my body and my arms are all dyed scarlet.

It's as if I fell into a sea of fire. Red everywhere, as far as the eye can see. Shock-like pain runs through me if I move the slightest. My left shoulder and back. Pain. Agony.

Time seems to stop. Frozen in place.



Cool liquid drips into my mouth. I regain some consciousness but my eyes won't budge. Only a bit of sensation has come back. What's underneath me seems to be soft and comfortable blankets. I breathe out gently and relax. But suddenly my limbs are constricted. I jerk in alarm but I'm stuck no matter how much I struggle.

Someone is quietly talking to me now. I don't know what they're saying. I only feel the torturous spasms going down my back and through my body as the arrowhead burrows into my flesh as if to pull my insides out.

"Ow..." I manage to get a word out.

That person is still mumbling something. I run out of energy so I let him hold tightly onto my wrist. My mind starts to wander. Then suddenly I sense a sweltering heat near me. The next moment I feel it pressing into my injury. The burning knife digs into me and the heat quickly spreads to the rest of my body. It tears apart the hardened scabs. Pain. Searing pain. I can't make a single sound. The pain makes me want to thrash around but I've been restrained.

I don't know how much time has passed when the heat leaves my back. I pant for air. The arrowheads appear to have been taken out and someone is applying medicine followed by wounding layer after layer of bandage on me. I moan from the pain. I'm sticky all over with sweat.

My mind starts up again but I have no energy left for my body. I can't get my eyes to open for my life. I try to sleep but I'm burning and in so much pain that I can't.

So I lie here, half-asleep, half-awake. And the whole time I feel as if someone is here beside me. Concerned eyes. Warm hands. Bitter herbs. Soothing whispers.



When I finally wake up, I can get my eyes open. What's before me are drapes and flickering candlelight. It's nice and quiet. The smell of herbs lingers in the air.

Whew! Another close call. I'm beyond hardy! Not even the devil wants me my company.

I feel like laughing but the movement tugs on my wounds. I hiss out and bare my teeth in pain.

I sigh. Han Xin, when will your luck change for the better?

It takes a lot of effort to roll onto my side when I hear voices outside the door.

"Why won't you let me in?"

"Enough! Do you not think you have done enough already?"

Then silence. I can only smell the thick herbal scent in the air. I try to lift the drapes up to see what's going on but I have no strength at all.

I think I hear 'stomp, stomp, stomp', and someone saying, "I don't care. I'm going in!"

"Do you really think you can do as you please simply because I have tolerated you over and over again?"

Then I catch a girl's soft sobs. "But...but...."

"I have already dispatched a letter for your father to send someone to accompany you back immediately!"

The sobbing dies down. Soon it's quiet again and stays that way.

I sigh lightly. Is Murong Yu upset again?

Quiet footsteps slowly approach and stop. I peer out of the corner of my eye only to see a tall, towering silhouette on the drapes. The figure remains motionless, as if observing me through the drapes. After some time, a hand is raised, as if he wants to touch the drapes.

I frown. What's wrong with this guy? Just spit it out. What's the worst? One count of kidnapping the duchess and one count of attempted escape is all.

He sighs and turns away.

"Murong Yu," I call him but I realise how light and raspy my voice is.

I doubt he had heard me because the silhouette starts heading towards the door. Frustrated, I take a deep breath, ignoring my wounds.

"Murong Yu!"

He stops and looks at me. "You-you're awake?"

I had used up all my energy calling him and the pain from my back makes my breath stop short. I watch as he strides forth and throws the drapes to the side. I frown from the sudden brightness only to look into Murong Yu's black eyes. The more I do the more they seem to darken as if they're going to suck me in.

Our eyes stay connected.

He sits down on the *ta*³⁷'s edge and carefully helps me up while watching me intently. "Feeling better?"

I nod. I can feel his body heat through my clothes. Very soon, my back starts aching from only sitting for a bit. I consider some options before going ahead and leaning on his shoulder.

How nice. Human cushions are the best.

His body tenses and he moves in closer. Watching me from the corner of his eye, his gaze meets mine.

"You're finally awake after all these days." Then he puts an arm around me. "Does this feel all right?"

I nod again and let my eyelids fall a bit. I don't want to speak. Mind you, speaking takes a lot of effort.

His eyes don't leave me and he starts caressing my face.

I turn my head and request unhurriedly, "Water."

The next moment, a bowl of water appears in front of me. He lifts it up to my mouth and watches as I drink. I feel his warm hand on my back as I do.

I don't know why but I think I like this.

"Hey, do you know who those people were?" I ask.

He doesn't reply, instead he puts down the bowl. His hand tightens on my shoulder. "You really want to know?"

I nod. He takes something out from his breast pocket and shows it to me. My eyes go wide and I gasp.

It's a silver steel arrowhead that flashes dangerously under the candlelight and seems to draw you towards it. I can faintly make out the character 'Heng' on it.

I turn my head away to get it out of my sight.

Marshal Heng is a fierce and ambitious man. He has waged many wars and killed even more, always relentless as long as his goal gets accomplished. His motto is to be proud and frank with oneself even in the face of death. Countless had submitted out of fear in the presence of the flags with his name. I had only blurted his name out without much thought. I didn't think it would really be him.

I breathe out deeply, nearly forgetting about the wounds. I grimace at the pain. I wiggle into his arms and stay there, too lazy to move anymore.

The candlelight dances, making his silhouette appear brighter one moment and darker the next. His eyes are a little bloodshot and his face pale—a bit thinner too—as if he hasn't gotten good rest for some time.

"Don't think about it. What's important is getting better. You have been out for almost ten days." Murong Yu is regarding me with a frown as though he's distressed.

Wow, another illusion from being wounded too critically.

I carelessly grunt in reply and tuck the blankets tighter, ready to take a nice long nap, when he says.

"Han Xin, I just don't get it." He touches my face and stops by my lips. "You had the chance to leave. Why did you not take it?"

I look up at him, eyes wide. I can't decipher the look in his eyes.

"She said she got drunk and you were bringing her back. Could it be that you couldn't bear to part with the silly girl?"

Any drowsiness I felt is instantly washed away. My mind spins while I observe his inquisitive expression. My back starts hurting again.

"Sorry," I cough from discomfort. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I speak calmly but deep down I'm actually surprised. He has easily exposed my thoughts. He comes closer again. I rush to escape but he grabs my wrist.

"You might have fooled her but you can't fool me." His unrelenting gaze travels over my face, anger seems to be brewing from within. "You don't like her arrogance and overbearing ways yet you let her order you around and keep her company. Isn't it all just so you can get her pass to leave camp?"

I shudder. His smouldering eyes seem to burn into me. For a second there, I actually felt a bit discomposed from having my plans exposed but I quickly turn away.

"I don't want to argue. You won't believe what I say anyway."

He pauses before he hisses through clenched teeth. “Don’t you know how dangerous it is right now? Yet you walked right out of there. She might not be mature enough to think things through but you didn’t have to drop to her level too!”

“What are you, a preacher? Go tell her this yourself! She’s the duchess—your fiancée. Not mine!”

I cover my mouth as soon as I finish—am I out of my mind? Saying stuff like that!

All that movement makes my wounds ache even more. I slouch and pant for air, holding onto his shoulders for support.

He hurriedly gives me a hand. “I’m not here for this. I was just asking. You didn’t stop her even though you were well aware of the dangers as well as my orders so I can’t help but suspect that you had other intentions.”

My mouth hangs wide from shock. I did have intentions to escape but I didn’t think it would be that obvious to him.

But he smiles contently, holding my wrist tight. “I’m right, aren’t I? You left the camp with her so you can find a chance to escape. Am I right, Han Xin?”

Frustrated, I try to jerk my hand away but he pulls it back. Pain shoots through my back so I can only stay still.

“She said that she was the one who dragged you along, that it’s all her fault. It’s actually the first time I’ve seen that brat pleading on behalf of someone.”

He keeps his eyes on me. I can’t tell whether he’s smiling or not and that unnerves me. I take a moment to regain my composure and try to distance myself from him as much as possible.

I tilt my head away and say, “Doesn’t matter whether you believe it or not. What had happened happened. Punish me however you’d like.”

Hearing my words, he nudges my head back to face him and studies me with those enigmatic eyes of his. I can feel his searing heat as he draws near.

“Tell me, Han Xin. Should I be rewarding you or punishing you?”

My breath stops short. I get lost in his eyes and actually forget to reply. He starts massaging my back with his other hand, making circles around my wounds, carefully and with the right pressure. It’s tingly and itchy. I clench my jaw and glare while he smiles and closes in until his lips are right against my earlobes. I shudder and try to edge away but he clutches onto me.

“You wanna leave? That’s so naïve of you. You shouldn’t forget about your circumstances right now.”

I swat his hand away. I’m enraged but I put on a kind smile. “You shouldn’t forget to thank me, Murong Yu. You wouldn’t be sitting here all worry-free if anything happened to that girl.”

He freezes, his hand stops rubbing.

I curl my lips. “The debts I owe you have been more than repaid now. I’m of no more use to you, so...let me go. If you’re man enough.”

His lingering gaze is no longer sharp but looks rather dejected. After some brooding, he looks at me and brushes some hair on my forehead. Annoyed, I turn away but he grabs my chin.

“In your dreams.”

His lips are on mine before I know it and his body soon follows suit. His icy-cold lips keep planting fire-hot kisses. I stare threateningly at him and struggle against his constraining arms. He remains unfazed and uses the momentum to push me back onto the pillow. Stinging pain shoots through my back, making me gasp. He lowers himself until he’s only inches away from me. I can feel his warm breaths on my face.

“Talking with you always drives me up the wall. I say we do something else with you instead.”

I’m so mad I can’t see straight. I rip my right hand out and swing it at his face. I wouldn’t resort to this unless necessary—it’s too effeminate. He dodges it and pushes my hand down. I hear a chuckle and then his lips are on me again.

My bandages have already come undone during the scuffle and warm, sticky blood is flowing down along my spine. The intense pain prevents me from moving further. All my strength has gone. My body tenses up from the pain but I don’t have the power to stop him so I can only watch as he does what he pleases with his lips and tongue.

I give up. I don’t want to die just yet. Plus, it’s not like I have anything to lose from him messing around.

He lets go of my lips, perhaps because he noticed my tightly-knit brows and lack of resistance, and looks me up and down. I’m covered with sweat as I glower at him. He gasps and rips my blankets off. He reaches down my back. Pain runs up my back and I yelp out. His hand is dripping with blood—bright, red blood.

Only when he has felt the warm fluid does he scramble up frantically.

I press on the wound to lessen the bleeding and hiss weakly, “Is this...your punishment?”

His face pales and he flies out the door without a moment’s hesitation. His voice actually shakes when he calls for the doctor.

I bury my face in the pillow while waiting for the doctor. My teeth grind together in annoyance.

You think you can just do what you please because I can’t move around? I must’ve walked under a ladder—no, a dozen ladders—without knowing. I mean, I get captured, fine, okay, I’ve got nothing to say. But what did I do to come across such a ridiculous guy?

I drink my medicine and start feeling drowsy. He doesn’t leave, however, and stays by the *ta*.

Xiao Qinyun comes to mind. I bet that night’s experiences left a mark on her. I wonder if she got hurt. So I ask Murong Yu. His brows furrow as he recounts all that happened that night.

Marshal Heng’s men had arrived soon after we had left but they were cautious because they were not sure about our numbers. They stayed hidden until sunset before raiding the camp. All five hundred elites were caught off guard and killed in action. Marshal Heng’s subordinates couldn’t find Xiao Qinyun so they hid nearby in ambush until I discovered them.

A scout rode on horseback and reported this to Murong Yu. He immediately sent soldiers back to aid me. His men found us halfway, me and Xiao Qinyun barely hanging on with several dozen cavalries hot on our tracks. A bloody battle ensued and both parties suffered high losses.

After Marshal Heng's men finally retreated, Xiao Qinyun and I who had already lost consciousness were brought here.

The arrows were in too deep. After much contemplating, the doctor resolved to using a heated blade to cut open the flesh and taking out the arrowheads that way.

His eyes never leave me while he's telling me this.

"She's fine though." He sighs. "Just some light abrasions."

I'm thoroughly wiped after I take everything in. I drop back down on the sheets and let him tuck me in.

"She said you took her and broke through their ranks. Killed quite a few people as well." He continues casually, "Such martial prowess. Why hide it?"

Oh please! Anyone would try out every trick up their sleeves if they were being hunted down. Who'd actually want to meet the Grim Reaper?

But I restrain my thought and mumble, "Just some party tricks I know."

"Party tricks?" He scoffs. "I say you've been hiding it on purpose."

I close my eyes, not wanting to argue. Han Xin the playboy, Han Xin the useless dandy—I almost take this as a fact myself. It doesn't matter if one more person believes it.

The doctor's assistant comes in with the topical medicine.

"Give it here," Murong Yu orders.

My eyes are out on stalks. He is frowning in concentration as he removes layer after layer of bandage. I eye him tentatively as anger brews in his eyes after seeing my injury. Wary of his state, I hold back my comments and let him apply the medicine and freshen the dressing. He's well-versed but he is a man after all—too rough with his hands.

"Say, can't you be any gentler?"

"Say, can't you stop squirming around?!" He retorts.

"How can I when you're so rough.... Gentler!"

"Oh, now you're complaining? Why didn't you think about this before you signed up to be a knight in shining armour?"

"It's not like I wanted to! I didn't want anything to happen to her... 'cause you'd be in shit too... gentler I said!"

He stops, his gaze burning into me. "What d'you just say? Say it again." His voice is low and husky.

I do a double take and look back at him. He's sitting still, watching me, as if waiting for something.

He finally puts the medicine down after a long pause, his eyes seemingly going out of focus for a moment. "Is that really what you thought?"

A chill goes down my back.

Crap. Really shouldn't have said that...

I quickly go back to lying on the bed, acting as if I'm in too much pain to speak. He bends down and puts an arm around me, making sure not to disturb my injuries. I can feel his body heat—it seems to be burning hot.

“Um....” I swallow nervously. “I’m sleepy....”

His lips open as if to say something but in the end he only plants a soft kiss on my forehead.

Along with a barely audible sigh, he says:

“Sleep tight.”



Murong Yu is most certainly an unpredictable person.

I brood angrily when I'm finally allowed to get out of bed and walk around.

I've gotten better even though I've been injured and recovered numerous times recently. I don't even know why it's been one misfortune after another.

Whatever, I comfort myself, it's got to be uphill from here on out. It's just that the hill is still some distances away.

I've been lying here under the warm sun for quite some time. I start feeling drowsy and I let my eyelids droop down halfway. I'm about to enjoy some free time with me, myself and I when I catch the sound of shuffling fabric from behind.

“Come on out. Must be tiring standing there.”

Xiao Qinyun has jumped into my arms before I know it, eyes swollen and pink.

Apparently, Murong Yu had been extremely mad at her about what had happened, not only reprimanding her but also sending a letter to her father in the capital to come collect her. She had only talked back to him a little before he snapped and outright denied her of even the liberty to visit me, stopping her at the door.

Wow. Why can't this guy be more courteous to her? Hasn't her father always been of great help to him in the Yan imperial court?

I wipe her tears and get her to sit down. “Now, don't shed your tears so easily. You look like a kid when you do.”

“Brother! Not you too!” She shoots me a dirty look. “I'm mad enough that my sweetie Yu says that.”

“Well, they say good medicine is always bitter and truthful words are always grating. I tell you, I'm not one to lie.”

She pouts and looks down sadly. “I know I'm kind of out-of-control and I might not follow the rules. I'm not well-mannered and sensible like the other girls. And I know Yu doesn't like that, but...”

“But you just can't help it.” I peer at her before turning my eyes to what's before me.

The autumn gust sweeps through the September skies. All the leaves have fallen but you can still faintly feel a bit of the warmth of summer. The house I'm in has a simple layout consisting of a cloister with galleries like any other house but there seems to be a sense of grandeur. Only after some keen observation do you see some shadows of bureaucracy³⁸. The cloister is gently lit by the sunlight passing through the remaining branches. A soft breeze caresses my face, a bit cool to the touch.

"They say the girls over there are all gentle, lovely and incomparably beautiful. Say, do all you men like that kind of woman?"

I tilt my head and raise an eyebrow. She looks on intently, waiting for my reply.

Do we?

The capital city of Rui. I think I've forgotten most of it.

I only remember the many entertainments enjoyed by the elites. Every August, there would be the Moon and Chrysanthemum Festival. The passionate maidens and the affectionate lads would use this festival as a chance to meet, share secret words and rendezvous.

Gardens and yards would be full of chrysanthemums of various colours, going well with the thin, lightweight silk robes that the daughters of the upper class adorned. The ladies' trains and sleeves flowed and danced in the wind as they walked. They were refined and poised like angels of the heavens.

Hearing my recollections, Xiao Qinyun regards me with a longing look.

Feeling a bit evil, I start teasing her. "Of course no man wants to have a bossy girl shouting and hollering at him all day long." I let my eyes close. "Gentle and affectionate like water, sweet and adorable—now, no man would be able to resist that."

She peeks at me but stays quiet.

"If I had a fiancée," I continue, "who bossed me around and had a fiery temper, I'd be the first to avoid her."

"Then what do I do?" *Hiccup*. "My darling said my father's people are on their way already." *Sniff*. "I had to beg Empress Dowager for so long just so I could come here."

I quickly comfort her, fearing her tears. "Come now, what did I just say about looking like a kid?"

She starts crying and I run out of ideas.

"What should I do then...?" She sobs.

Well, what could an outsider like me do? Plus, I do not want anything at all to do with that bastard for now. My face gets red when I think of the things recently.

Changing my dressing: he has to do it personally.

Drinking medicine: it always ends up being a clash of lips and tongues.

Not to mention, a couple of the times I had almost gotten...

Brrrrr. A huge chill runs down my spine.

Wait a second.... All these strange behaviours of his...I can't help but relate them to indecent thoughts. Could it be that he's frustrated...sexually? And has no way of releasing it?

I eye Xiao Qinyun's pretty face, wet with tears, and an idea comes to mind.
It's just not a very decent one.
I wipe her tears and put on an honest face and a harmless smile. "Lemme ask you something. Don't be shy, you can just answer quietly."
She looks puzzled but nods anyway.
I lean in close to her ears and whisper, "Have you...with him?"
She jerks back, wide-eyed. Her cheeks soon flush red. I nod, looking dead serious. Her face is almost dripping with embarrassment.
With her head lowered, she finally gets two words out. "I...haven't."
See? I was right. Army men aren't allowed to bring their women along while on duty. It's only expected that he's in need for some release after such a long time out at war.
I think of the disgusting, vile, immoral things some of my colleagues in the Golden Guardians used to do... Erm. Sorry, off-topic.
I sneer as I lower down to her ears again and instruct her on the specific details of such-and-such. She gnaws on her lips, looks up, face flushed, and slaps me.
"Ouch!" I yelp and bend over in pain. "My dear Duchess, you're the one who asked for my help! You had better treat me better—there won't be anyone to help you if I die.
Her face contorts into a multitude of shapes at my comment.
I massage my back as I bear the pain and straighten up. "Fine, don't take my advice. Not my problem anyway."
She stops and stares me down.
I nod in reassurance. "Once it's all done, I'm sure he'll take responsibility³⁹."
She holds my gaze for a long time before whispering: "Is it doable?"
I can't express how delighted I am this instant. Only after I instruct her further on the specific details of such-and-such once again does she nod tentatively.
Mwahaha. Now no one will be bothering my naps.
Just you wait, Murong Yu, for your delicious meal.



I'm strolling around the yard after dinner. The evening wind blows in from outside, dispersing the warmth from the afternoon. It blows into my robes and gives me the chills.

I turn on the spot. Murong Yu's standing, hands behind his back, at the end of the gallery. Instead of armour, he has on a blue tight-sleeved robe that makes him seem all the more sharp and handsome.

Seeing him approaching, I check the sky.

Wait a minute. Why is he here at this time? Something's not right.

“What are you doing here this late?” He asks while frowning, unamused. “It gets chilly at night. You’ll catch a cold.”

I really don’t want to be near him so I quietly take a step back. “I shall return to my quarters at once. Thank you for the concern, your highness.”

The next thing I know he’s got me by my wrist. I don’t bother resisting for the sake of my injuries and let him pull me to his room.

Candles are burning bright beside a heap of scrolls on his desk. There’s also a stone pot sitting on it. I glance at it without much thought and plop down on a chair. He takes a seat across from me and flips over the tea cups.

“Well, you look like you’re fully recovered.”

“Hmm,” I respond. “With your highness giving me an endless supply of medicine and my previous martial training, I’m bound to recover quickly.”

He mumbles an inaudible reply and falls silent.

What’s wrong?

Curious, I glance up only to meet with his gaze filled with concern and worry as if he actually does care. Feeling uneasy, I gulp down the tea in front of me.

This should be the time when he’s...with Xiao Qinyun right?

It’s cozy in the room and with the hot tea in my stomach I feel warm all over.

“Don’t just drink tea.” He grins. “It doesn’t have any nutrients. Here, have some soup.”

He takes off the pot’s lid and a puff of steam hits my face. He hands a bowl and chopsticks to me. I hold the bowl of soup up and take a big whiff.

Smells wonderful.

He smiles. “It’s ginseng chicken soup.”

I peer cautiously into the bowl of soup and then back at him. “Why do I get soup out of nowhere?”

He shrugs and holds my gaze. “I can’t thank you enough for saving the duchess. Soup’s the least I can offer.”

That makes sense. I suppose. I study his eyes and he looks back steadily. Although it is an acceptable reason, I still put the bowl down and demand,

“I’ll drink it only if you do first.”

He frowns; I look back, unfazed. After a staring contest, he backs down. I watch him get another bowl and drink it himself before gulping mine down. I close my eyes in a moment of bliss as I feel warmth slowly spreading from my lips to the rest of my body, completely driving away the cold of the night. I’ve had better soup in my days but it smells so good. We reach the bottom of the pot in no time.

The sky is getting darker and darker. Murong Yu is showing no signs of fatigue and continues our conversation but somehow I sense that something is off.

There's something burning inside me, so hot that I can't stand sitting any further. I try to get up but my body is kind of limp and I have to steady myself with the table. He quickly helps me up and one of his arms hooks around my waist. But I can't afford to bother with him anymore.

Hot.

So hot.

Too hot.

I feel my face heating up and beads of sweat starting to form. I lose focus for a moment and my feet seem to miss a step. I fall straight into his arms. I look up—he's not much better than me. Face flushed and ears red, his breathing is hard and rushed. His grip on my waist gets stronger.

What's going on?

My mind's not functioning at normal speed. My hands wander to his shoulders and I lean on his chest.

What is this? He's definitely just as warm as me, the antonym of cool. But why do I find myself wanting to get closer?

"Why is it so hot?" He asks me, taking quick breaths. His eyes are lazy and half-closed, a faint hint of lust floating to their surface. "Why does your body feel so cold? I..."

I shudder as a warm current runs up my body and seeps through my skin. His hands sear my skin as they massage my limp and weak body. Being touched like this isn't all too bad.

How is this...

His breathing hastens and his eyes become clouded.

"I...I..." He stutters as he reaches for my collar and undoes it. He puts his hands on my chest and the sudden chill knocks some sense into me.

Something is definitely wrong.

I thrash around, trying to break free but he suddenly closes in and bites onto my neck while his hands start going all over my body. Pieces of clothing fall onto the floor one by one. My body temperature rises even higher. I think I feel desire rising up from within.

Well, duh. I've been abstinent for a while as well. There's no way I could help it.

He pulls me in closer. I can't see through my misty eyes. I only feel the hot air on my ears.

"I...I want you!"

³⁷ Please see below for picture

³⁸ Referring to the air of the court and its officials, often related to wealth, injustice and corruption.

³⁹ Traditionally, a man had to take responsibility of the woman(women) he has sexual intercourse with, not including prostitutes, etc. This meant taking her as his wife or concubine and fathering her children, as well as taking care of her family.

XII: Autumn Chills

Dim candle flames flicker back and forth.

He comes right up against me, seals his lips on mine and starts nibbling and sucking on them, hot and passionate breaths circulating amidst the tangle. My face is burning and the rest of my body only gets hotter by the second. Head aching, I open my eyes a crack only to see his lust-filled black eyes.

My god, what the hell is going on? Something's gone wrong!

I try to break free but I discover to my own dismay that my sweltering body can only find a bit more comfort in his cooler body. I raise a wobbling arm to push him away but he pulls it up over my head with one arm and pins it down. I grunt in pain.

Damn bastard. Taking advantage of me in my wounded state!

He turns his head over says in a soft, husky voice, "Don't be afraid. Give it to me..."

He then kisses my ear and nibbles lightly on my earlobes. A violent shudder runs through my body and my breathing quickens involuntarily. With his unbearably warm lips on my neck, waves of numbness wash over me. I'm weak to my bones being held in his arms while feeling sinful desires welling up from deep within. His breathing is already ragged. He runs his hands all over me, luring those desires out from their dwellings. I can only clench my jaw hard to hold back the moans that almost escape.

"Lemme hear you."

Kisses start coming down like rain. The last pieces of our garments get torn off and our naked bodies intertwine together. I'm cold and hot at the same time and my head is a mess. I painstakingly push against his chest.

Goddamn it.

Goddamn it.

This cannot happen...

My body has gone limp already so when I try getting up after struggling to draw the drapes open, he easily seizes my wrists with one hand and hooks around my waist with another and gets on top of me again.

“Get the hell-.”

But my words get stuffed back by his lips before I get to finish. His soft biting has turned into gnawing. Bits and pieces of red marks spread out. On my neck. On my collarbone. On my chest.

I still know what’s awaiting me despite my non-functioning mind. I want to struggle but my limbs are all pinned on the bed and I can barely catch my breath from his kisses. I can only pant for air whenever he releases me.

He’s pulling on my earlobes, nibbling on it every now and then.

“Still got some fight in you, huh,” he says as his hands move down along my spine, teasing me as much as he can.

Soon I feel a fuse being lit from my abdomen leading upwards to my head, muddying my conscience. My eyes get so watery that I can’t make out his complexion anymore. My hidden desires are being uncovered by him one by one. My conscience continues to blur out of focus. I reach around his shoulders and he dips down and leaves a purplish mark on my chest.

Noticing a lack of struggling, he pecks my lips. “Does it feel good?”

My body quivers uncontrollably along with his hands. I can’t feel anything but his gentle caresses, but I look away and hold my tongue. My body, however, starts shuddering, as if expecting something more.

I mustn’t say it. I mustn’t say it. Once I do there will be no take-backs.

“Not gonna say it, huh?” He spreads my legs apart.

Lying underneath him, his every degree of warmth seems to sear me. I feel his heat against that ungraceful place of mine. My body trembles. He holds me tighter, rubbing and poking his heat against it several times, as though searching for release.

Gentle friction. Gradual penetration. Tender destruction.

Suddenly, he lowers himself and catches me in a rushed kiss before rolling his hips forward. I’m drenched in bone-splitting pain, as if being torn in half, and my mind clears partially.

“You bastard...can’t you be gentler?”

I tremble without a sound, my words failing me.

He kisses my cheeks again, and coaxes, “Relax.... Relax.... You’ll only hurt yourself.”

I take deep breaths, urging myself to relax.

“That’s right. Just like that.”

He rolls his hips again and I let out a loud groan, my body arching up voluntarily. I dig my nails into his shoulders and press myself against his fire-hot chest only for him to gasp and start moving quicker.

“Get out...Oww!”

But my body’s reactions tell no lies. It quivers with every one of his movements. Even the drops of his sweat that falls on me seem to burn with incredible temperature. The candlelight outlines his silhouette, leaving his eyes as the only things sparkling. He’s on top of me, breathing heavily, tearing at my lips—for a second I think I would pass out from the pleasure.

A tingly, numb feeling builds up from within as our bodies fuse together, increasing with intensity; each of his penetrations brings both torturous pain and incomparable joy at the same time.

Lust fills the air to a suffocating degree. Desire crashes down like tidal waves, drowning us and rolling us into its depths.

With the candles almost burnt out, the room goes dim and the white canopy turns into mist.

I lose all awareness.

No dreams come.



I painstakingly open my eyes.

I only move the slightest and a heart-wrenching pain shoots through me, but I can't pinpoint what's hurting. It just hurts everywhere.

I prop myself up on my elbows to get up but my lower body seems to rip apart. I clench my jaw. Then it hits me like lightning in a storm. Memory fragments resurface. I bury my face into the soft pillow—I wish I can just suffocate to death now.

I actually...underneath a man.

I close my eyes, exhausted, and smile wryly.

I feel a body closely flanking me from behind. He seems to be holding onto my waist too. I slowly turn my head over to see those damn pretty eyes of his appearing extra energetic. He tightens his grip and pulls me closer to him after seeing me wake and puts a blanket over us. Surrounded by his warmth and breathing, I try to break free but I don't seem to have any strength left to do so.

He nuzzles my forehead. "Whatcha thinking about?"

Enraged, I tilt my head away, escaping his hot breaths.

"Killing you."

"Oh?" He stops for a moment before chuckling. "You sure you wanna do that?"

I try my best to distance myself from him, although it's not quite working. "Why wouldn't I? Who do you think you are?"

"You wanna murder your own man?"

"You fucking...Go away!" I'm so mad I can't see straight anymore.

I can't believe I got...by a man. And I was the one on the bottom!

He's looking all the more joyful as he puts an arm around my shoulders. "You and your words again. Whatever. I'll let it slide." He wiggles closer, smirking, and takes a bite off to the side of my lips.

"So, how're you feeling now?" He whispers.

I glare threateningly at him before closing my eyes. I feel like jelly, soft and weak, not to mention sticky all over. I've already moved around too much just now so I just want to sleep.

I let my mind relax for one second and he's reached over like he's been doing it for his whole life. Electricity seems to run through me.

"Stop it!"

His lips linger between my brows as he teases, "What's the big deal? I've seen it all last night." His hands keep going, touching me everywhere, raising the temperature wherever it goes.

He is one thick-skinned asshole all right. After seeing him sitting pretty there as if I fell into his lap, I would pay to have his face beaten to a pulp.

His eyes bore into me; his breath mere inches away. We're so close that our hair are entangled and I can even see my own reflection in his unclouded pupils, as well as the sinful marks on my bare chest. Instantly, the heated passions from last night rushes forth again and my cheeks start burning. Just as I'm about to turn away he plants his lips on me. A moist warmth smothers me and his agile tongue sneaks into my mouth, an action so tender I'm about to drown in it.

My breathing hastens. Concupiscent and carnal desires arise.

He reluctantly lets go before sitting up and putting on a shirt. "They say 'they rose when the sun was high in the sky, the sensual night too short; and since then the emperor missed the morning court'⁴⁰. I can finally relate now."

I pull the blanket over and glance at him out of the corner of my eye. "Please, don't flatter yourself."

I'm completely wiped out. I don't even want to lift a finger.

I meet and greet everyone of the Yan royal clan in my head, damn every single one and cast the vilest curses upon them all, starting with the founding emperor of Yan all the way down to Murong Yu's unborn grandson. That bastard was like a beast in heat, torturing me throughout the entire night. I've only recently recovered and couldn't possibly handle such vigorous activity. I'm just exhausted.

I roll onto my other side and wrap myself tight with the blanket. I yawn and get ready to go back to sleep.

There's nothing I can do about this now. I'm very angry, indeed, but I don't even have the energy to speak right now. Plus, I'm not a woman who needs to protect her virtuous chastity. I don't need to sob, break down and hang myself over this. Eh, screw this. I should take a nice, long nap, get back into shape and organize my thoughts about this later.

I hear footsteps approaching. "You can sleep in a bit. Wash up first."

"Huh?" I glower at him.

He grins and lifts my blankets away. I blush and resist without thinking, trying to cover my body with the blanket, but he just ignores me and carries me into the back room.

"I was looking at it all night. There's nothing to hide."

Steam gently swirls in the misty air.

I start to feel better being bathed in hot water. My arms are lazily hanging out one side of the tub and my eyes start fluttering close out of drowsiness. He's standing outside, carefully washing me with a cloth. I was already tender all over and now with the water I can barely stand, so I let him do as he pleases.

"Murong Yu, you sure got a lotta free time for a grand marshal. It's almost noon now." I still have enough energy to have words of course.

He chuckles as he scrubs. He blows on my shoulder and touches it. I jolt from the touch and my fingers grip onto the tub's ledge. His fingers are tracing the scar on my left shoulder again and again.

"This here, does it still hurt?"

I haven't quite comprehended what he had said so I'm watching him, dumbfounded. All I can see in his intense eyes is warmth and more warmth.

Oh, right. This injury was from that time I saved him.

He bends over and kisses it. I tremble, completely forgetting to resist.

"You'd slept for so long that night. As if you weren't gonna wake again..." His lips leave, revealing red hickies on my shoulder. He grins. "Here, I'll clean you up and then you can go get some proper rest."

His fingers wiggle into me. Thank goodness he's actually cleaning, so I close my eyes and try to ignore the intrusion.

After changing into clean undergarments, I get carried back to the bed again. He tucks me in and plants a light kiss on my forehead.

"Rest well. I'll be back later."



So apparently noontime during autumn can be quite warm.

The cloudless azure skies stretch as far as the eye can see. The dazzling sunlight cascades down like warm liquid gold, hitting my face along with the autumn winds. So soothing and peaceful.

I'm lying on a soft grass field, eyes closed, lazing under the warm sunshine, chewing on a piece of straw.

I had woken up a bit past sunset that day and I was still sore as hell when I got up. I ate dinner that he brought for me all the while suffering from the pain, and then I fell straight back to sleep before he even came to bed.

Well, I'm not against having a plushy human cushion to lean on in my sore and tender state, but it's a different story when said cushion starts snickering and gets all touchy.

If only I had a knife within reach I would've most definitely, without hesitation, skinned him alive. If only I had been able to move.

Geez, what am I doing? Even now I still can't do anything but zone out at the azure blue sky.

I really don't want to think about what happened that night. Okay, I admit I've been pretty unlucky recently, but this has got to be a joke!

I found out afterwards that it was indeed Xiao Qinyun who made that pot of soup, except she added an extra ingredient on top of chicken and ginseng. My god! I was only kidding with her. Who knew that she could get her hands on aphrodisiacs?!

And Murong Yu, too! He went to the kitchen for god knows what reason and decided to take it after finding the smell nice...

I close my right hand tightly into a fist and pound the ground with all my strength.

'You can never escape your own doings'⁴¹.' I truly get this saying now.

When I used to live a sensualist lifestyle back in the capital, I'd go through a million pretty flowers and not have a single keep me down. Who'd ever thought that that playboy would get bottomed by another man?

I exhale deeply, open my eyes a little and let them close again.

I think back to that night. My delirious moans as my body writhed to meet his. I even came in his hands. It was as if my body wasn't my own.

What a fucking disgrace!

I let out a long sigh. I feel as if something's stuck in my chest. It won't come up or go back down. It's just choking me.

What is this thing between Murong Yu and I? Sex-deprived for too long? So we were just looking for some release?

My dignity of being a man, the most important part of being a man, was stamped upon and smothered. I want to murder someone when I think about it!

But, the things he did that night...felt pretty good...I mean it wasn't all too bad. He was pretty good at it. Obviously very experienced. It was in part because of the drugs but I have to admit I didn't really resist either-

Ugh! No! What the fuck are you thinking, Han Xin?! You high? How the hell can you think it felt good? Both of you being men, you got the short (the shortest!) end of the stick!

Aphrodisiacs, huh.

It's okay, I tell myself. I was only acting weird because of the drugs. I'm not so sex-deprived that I would get sexually aroused by some man. That I would start developing an attraction to men.

I'm not turning into a homo.

My mind starts to settle down. I am still my own man.

I hear footsteps coming closer and stopping beside me. I can feel that something is blocking the sun with my eyes closed.

"Oi, get outta the way. Don't block ma sun."

It took a lot of work to find a place to sunbathe in a residence this huge. I don't want anyone disturbing my nap for no good reason.

But my face remains in the shadows. Annoyed, I open my eyes only to see Murong Yu's dark eyes and his pursed lips.

"Why have you been avoiding me lately?!" He interrogates after a short silence.

I prop myself up to a sitting position and regard him with the weed in between my teeth. "I need a least a couple days t' take it all in, dun I?"

He turns his gaze away to something in the distance.

"How d'you like it if yer topped by 'nother man, huh?" I angrily break the weed in half and spit it out while staring straight to the front.

He takes a step towards me with a half-smile. "You hate me?"

I suddenly feel too tired to look at him. "Wouldn't call it hate. I've never hated anyone, really. It's just been kind of a blur the last few days. I just need some alone time."

He walks until he's in front of me before squatting down to look at me. I purse my lips in defiance but let him pick out the grass in my hair.

"I don't want you to hate me either," He blurts.

I force a smile but it's a pathetic attempt.

"But I'm gonna say this even if you do. I've never been one for take-backs." He pauses. "I'm serious."

I shake my head.

Serious? How humorous.

I don't buy it.

It could all be an act between a man and a woman, let alone between two men. Not to mention, we are of such different classes and belong to rival states. That night of passion was nothing but a mistake caused by aphrodisiacs.

I don't want to dwell on it so I'll just forget about it.

Yup, it was just a mistake.

I stand up and brush my clothes off and then he gets up too. I glance at him. "Let's forget about it all. Like nothing ever happened."

He grabs my arm. "Are you being serious?"

I look up at him with no expression. I spot a pained emotion from his eyes. His grip on my arm tightens and I try breaking free but to no prevail.

"Of course I'm being serious.

"Everything'll fade with enough time." My voice is almost monotonous. "What happened that night just wasn't normal. It'd be good for both you and me to forget it."

"You!" He growls and takes a step as though to embrace me but I pull away. He stops.

"Think over it some more. You can stay by my side forever, Han Xin. You can help me."

I fling his hand away and back away some more. "What does your highness think I am? Your servant in title, your concubinus in reality?"

I sense anger in his expression and scoff. "Ah, I guess this is a prisoner's fate. Not even in control of his own life."

“Prisoner?” He repeats slowly. “I’ve never thought of you as a prisoner aside from the very beginning. Tell me, have you ever seen a prisoner like you?”

I grin. “You’ve your own reasons for treating me how you do. Whatever your goals are, they’re your problem. Got nothin’ to do with me.”

He pauses for a moment before taking quick steps back. His gaze is suddenly filled with all sorts of emotion that I can’t identify. I can’t tell if he’s fine or upset.

“Xin,” he calls me.

I turn away. “My name is Han Xin, your highness. It would be the best if you could call me by that.”

He scowls and his eyes seem to get darker as he watches me, like trying to see the bottom of an old well or a swamp. The moment I’m about to leave, he grabs onto my wrist and the next thing I know he has his arms around my waist and has me backed against a tree. His hot breath hits my face and upsets me. I brace myself and glare back at him. He holds my glare, not letting go of me.

“Murong Yu!”

He finally says, “Han Xin, I think you need to calm down. We can talk about this again once you are.”

“I am calm!” I ball up my fists behind my back. A punch would do the job if it has to come down to it.

He only holds me tighter as if I haven’t said a thing. So tight it’s uncomfortable. I’m flexing my arms, about to break free, when someone appears, running towards us from the distance. The two of us immediately spring apart.

“Your Highness, there is an urgent message!”

Murong Yu’s face has returned to its normal state. He shoots that person a look. “You are dismissed.”

Not staying a second longer, I step back, turn and leave.

You and I were meant to be like this, Murong Yu.



Close to half a million men on either side of South Hill Pass have been caught in a standoff for several days, the seemingly calm surface hiding within it a tempest. However, this balance is quickly disturbed.

Five thousand of Yan dragoons ride into South Hill Pass at night. After the Rui soldiers on night duty spotted them from the towers, three thousand cavalry under Marshal Heng immediately rushes out of the fortress to face them. Perhaps because the Great Rui has lost nearly every battle, the Yan captain drops his guard and the world is given a taste of the military prowess of Marshal Heng.

Xu Zheng, Marshal Heng's right-hand-man, uses blood and flesh as bait to lure the five thousand Yan cavalry into pursuing them. Engaging sometimes and running away other times, they succeed in luring the entire Yan cavalry into Sparrowhawk Ravine.

Sparrowhawk Ravine. As the name suggests, one must be as quick and agile as a sparrowhawk to escape from there.

The moment the Yan troops enter the ravine, one thousand bowmen start firing down from either side while another two thousand men block the valley entrance. Xu Zheng then turns his troops back around. His vanguards split their enemies in half, striking through them like lightning and creating a typhoon of blood. The Battle of Sparrowhawk Ravine lasts from night until noon, and then from noon until the next dawn.

The heavily wounded Yan captain leads a squad shy of one thousand men out of the deathtrap and reports straight back to the base. Xu Zheng's side is also left with just little more than one thousand men. They retreat back into the Pass.

The corpses lie in countless heaps and piles, blood flowing freely across the ravine floor. One could even smell the sick, sweet smell of blood in the air from miles away. Even the birds and beasts shy away.

The morale of the Rui army skyrockets and everyone in the nation speaks of the eminence of Marshal Heng.

Heng Ziyu—Marshal Heng.

He was known as an unparalleled military prodigy in his youth, but moreover he is known for his cruel and merciless ways. Once, when the County of Jin An⁴² in the south had been suffering from menacing pirate attacks, he evacuated a large portion of the residents of Jin An and used the four thousand remaining elderly and young who wouldn't leave as bait. He instructed his forces posted upstream to destroy the dams after luring all the pirates into the county. The entire county and three hundred miles of surrounding fertile land was flooded in an instant. What used to be a wealthy county and sizable farmland was wiped out by the raging waves overnight.

His way was obviously over the line but there was no doubt that people die from battles and he had ended the conflict in the shortest amount of time with the least amount of casualties. If he had not done so, losses would not have only numbered in the ten thousands.

Afterwards, Heng received harsh criticism from the emperor despite the pirates never attacking again in fear of him. At the same time, he was bestowed with the peerage of marquis and the title Protector of the Seas along with the decree for him and his descendants to remain posted in the southern borders for life, never to return to the north without royal edict. Now, letting him out of sight spelt trouble—he has looked down upon the royal family and has held no respect towards the court ever since.

He was exiled to the south because he was at fault, but when it came down to it the senior court officials were the ones who affected the making of that decree. Great Rui was established upon scholastics. The only emperor to date to have had a martial background was the founding

emperor, Emperor Rui Shun⁴³. The civil officials⁴⁴ were not pleased to see people from insignificant backgrounds gain power through martial means and displace their own control of the court.

Now, under the destructive hooves of the Yan cavalry, Rui is finally faced with the deadly consequences after centuries of this policy against martial achievement.

I do not know if Marshal Heng can salvage this fragile country on the brink of collapsing but I do know Murong Yu is up against a vicious opponent.



So I've been giving Murong Yu the silent treatment. Erm. Well that's not quite it. It's more like he's been way too busy with the reports and orders coming in nonstop from the front lines and the Yan capital to worry about me.

But I'm not that much better off either. The people who were supposed to pick Xiao Qinyun up still hadn't arrived yet and Murong Yu didn't want any more trouble from her so he placed her under strict surveillance at all hours of the day. Of course, I end up being dragged along by her.

I didn't deserve this!!! How could I possibly successfully escape when I'm up to my neck dealing with her?!

I exasperatingly cry in my mind but I still have to do my work diligently—watching the stove with her as the medicine broils.

Oh right. Ever since that incident with her ginseng chicken soup, I've been more than cautious with what she makes. I mean being able to get her hands on aphrodisiacs all the way out here in the country—I can't even fathom!

But I do have a bone to pick with her. See, originally she had been waiting patiently in the kitchen for the chicken soup to be done, but she ended up leaving for a second. When she got back the soup was gone so she rushed off to look for it. She heard Murong Yu and me talking from outside his room but she's always been a bit wary of Murong Yu so she didn't come in.

Why did she not come in? Ah...

I shake my head sadly. Was there just no way I could've avoided it?

She's quietly watching the dancing flames in the stove, lips slightly pursed, eyes half-shut, looking kind of down. I'm quiet too. Needless to say, I know why she's down.

It's been raining nonstop since autumn arrived. Murong Yu, not very used to the cold and damp climate of Southern Yan, had caught a cold when his meetings went too late into the night a few days ago.

I'm staring at the darkening twilight outside the window, my heart somehow unsettled.

"Brother, you're zoning out again," she quips.

It takes me a moment to focus and when I do I see her studying me with curious eyes, her face propped in her hands.

“You’ve been like this for a few days already, always out of it. What’s on your mind?”

I look away from the window and flash an apologetic smile at her. I don’t know what to say in reply so I use the medicine to divert her attention.

I actually do feel a bit guilty towards her. After all, she was supposed to be the one who spent the night with Murong Yu that night, not me. But thank goodness she doesn’t know that, or else we’d never hear the end of it.

It was just a big, fat mistake. An unlucky coincidence.

“Do you miss home?” She edges close and asks me softly. I shake my head but she continues, “It has to be. I mean I miss my home so much right now. I miss the swallow nest and snow fungus congee with rock sugar my mommy makes me.”

I glance at her from the corner of my eye. “I have no home so how could I miss it?” I sigh.

She freezes, shocked, before looking back down. I don’t say another word.

A Duchess of the royal clan born into the manor of a prime minister, having grown up in the imperial palace and court, she will also marry into a lord’s manor one day. Everything she’d seen and experienced are the best of the best. I bet all this that’s happened is news to her.

All this trouble just for the man she likes. Poor girl.

“My sweetie’s been the same lately too. Bad temper. Scary expression all day.” She leans on my shoulders as she watches the flames. “Won’t eat medicine or rest properly even though he’s caught a cold...”

I look down and try to not listen to or think about what she’s saying.

The flames are going strong, painting the walls with a dark red shade.

Ever since that night, I’ve been feeling guilty and awkward around her. She really trusts me and even more so after I brought her to safety that time, but I’ve been using her some of the time, using her status, her naivety, for my own goals.

Such as escaping.

I know it’s a pretty vile thing to do but I also know that sometimes you must do whatever it takes to reach your goal. I’m not a saint. I can’t be honest and righteous my whole life.

Murong Yu should be her husband. I believe he’ll be a good husband, a good father, and not my...

I shake my head furiously to chase these thoughts away.

“Brother, can you go talk to him?”

I shake my head without replying her, not even looking at her hopeful eyes. There’s nothing for me to say. What I need to do now is stay the hell away from him.

I help her pour the medicine out and stir it around with a small spoon. Only after making sure the temperature is okay do I accompany her to Murong Yu’s room.

The candle lights burn dimly as he sits, head bowed, reading the high-priority reports in front of him. There’s several other opened reports laid out on his desk that he isn’t done with. Brush and ink has been put to the side. A breeze blows in, making the paper rustle in its wake. He coughs lightly, his shoulders moving as well. His figure just seems so lonely.

Something in my chest seems to jerk a little.

Xiao Qinyun pushes the door open and goes in only after I give her a small nudge. I quickly dodge to the side and conceal myself in the darkness.

Xiao Qinyun approaches him and puts the medicine down on his desk.

“Put it down and leave,” he orders coldly without even looking up.

“Yu, I’ll go after you drink it.”

“Leave. Do not make me repeat myself.”

“No!”

Perhaps Murong Yu is truly tired and doesn’t want her around anymore. He takes the bowl and finishes it in one go, and then tosses it onto the tray before drinking some tea.

“You may leave now.”

She bites on her lips before looking down without a word and walks out the door.

Just as I’m about to leave he says in his cold voice,

“Come in, Han Xin.”

⁴⁰ This is a line from a Tang Dynasty ode, translated as “The Song of Everlasting Regret.” Full translation found here, <http://www.musicated.com/syh/TangPoems/EverlastingRegret.htm>

⁴¹ This is the second half of a phrase that translates to ‘things can be done to counter heaven-sent natural disasters but nothing can be done when it is your own doing.’

⁴² 晉安 (*jin4 an1*), literally ‘tranquil advancement’ (or ‘peaceful Jin’), was the name of a county established in 282 CE (Western Jin Dynasty) and used until 589 CE (Sui Dynasty) that covered an area around present day Fuzhou, Fujian.

⁴³ 瑞順 (*rui4 shun4*), literally ‘auspicious benignity.’

⁴⁴ see Translator Notes.

XIII: Nightmare

I can only look to the sky helplessly once I hear him say that.

How the hell did he know I was hiding outside the door? Did he grow a third eye or something?

Murong Yu's been tied up with dealing with the front line for the past few days so I haven't been bothered. I've had enough alone time too but I really do not want to revisit our last talk. So the best way to go would be to avoid him, but turns out that tactic isn't working out either.

So I hesitantly shuffle over.

Murong Yu doesn't look up. The light is behind him, concealing his eyes and his emotions in shadows. He continues to flip through the mound of scrolls laid out before him without a word, his forehead propped up by his hand.

What the hell is this? Does he not see me standing here? Or does he just want to make it hard on me?

The air in the room is almost still. I take a quick peep at him and just as I'm about to sneak out he speaks,

"Did I say you could leave?"

He didn't speak very loudly but his voice still had the usual power and coolness to it. It makes me realize the awkward spot I'm in—a prisoner who has his life and future in the hands of someone else. So I stand still with my head bowed and ask in a polite voice, "What may I do for you, your highness?"

He picks up his brush and dips it in the inkwell while pointing to the tray on the table with his left hand. "Take that out."

I can't object to his command so I edge over to the table warily and run straight towards the door after taking the tray. A question pops into my mind just as I get to the door.

"How did you know I was outside?" I turn around to ask him.

He stops for a moment before returning to his previous unblinking, unmoving state and continues reading his reports. "I doubt that brat knows how to serve. Did you honestly expect me to believe she could make the temperature just right?"

Oh. Right....

Okay, whatever. I must be coming down with something to be asking such a random question.

Just as I'm about to leave, I hear him coughing behind me. I quickly turn to look only to see him grimacing and covering his mouth, one hand reaching out for the teapot. For some reason I hurry back and grab that hand.

"Don't drink while coughing," I instruct.

He looks up at me with a confused look.

"You'll choke if you do," I explain. "Just drink it in a bit."

He watches me.

Feeling sort of self-conscious of my actions, I let go of his hand while chuckling nervously. "Um, so I'm going to leave you to your business then, your-."

He snatches my wrist before I can finish.

The sky outside is getting all the more gloomy. A storm is about to break.

Murong Yu keeps his unreadable gaze on me, his lips curving up slightly. "You...care for me?"

I stop in my track. He tightens his grip after studying my face for quite a while. His thin, long fingers are strangely cold. Only the palm contains a shred of warmth.

I pull my hand away and take a step back, keeping him in my sight.

"You overstate matters, your highness." I let my nerves settle before turning to leave out the door.

He suddenly yanks me back by the arm. "Did I dismiss you?" He interrogates flatly while pushing aside the paper and brush.

"Your highness has made orders for me to refrain from roaming after the hour of the Pig⁴⁵. I'm merely following orders."

He didn't seem to expect that and starts chuckling. "I should've known better. You are the best when it comes to battles of the tongue."

I can't spot any trace of the usual fierceness or aloofness from his amiable smile under the dim, yellow candlelight.

I finally give up from the eye contact and start laughing as well. The two of us have been in a strop lately. All we've exchanged are sharp glares; not a word. Well, of course, there had been a bunch of soldiers behind him every time we bumped into each other, and I hadn't wanted to speak with him.

This is the first time we're alone by ourselves since that night.

I'm so tired of it. Always being stony-faced. It's just not how I do.

"Whatcha thinking about?" He asks unusually softly.

I shrug and then pick up his cloak and put it around his shoulders. "You don't wanna catch a cold. Aren't you old enough to take care of yourself by now?"

He flashes a smile, his long brows dancing up, and wraps his cloak around himself.

I pick up the tray again and turn my head to say to him, "It's getting late. You'd better head to bed."

Before I manage to make the turn, he reaches over my shoulders, taking away the things I'm holding, and holds onto my hands. I almost jump out of my skin. I briskly whip my head around only to look into the mysterious depths of his eyes.

"Don't go." He breathes against my ear. "Stay with me for a bit."

I shudder and quickly tilt my head away. "Why should I? You've got your fiancée for company."

Kind of pissed off, I try to shove him away. Amidst the scuffle I elbow him in the chest very hard.

Ummphf. He frowns and purses his lips while clutching his chest, hissing for air.

I clench my jaw hard. My mind suddenly goes blank.

Shit. He's sick to begin with and now I've just hit him. It's got to hurt.

Murong Yu puts his entire body weight on me, brows tightly knit as he pants softly. I help him over to his bed after seeing him not saying a word with his brows all furrowed up. I pour some hot tea out in a cup and feed it into his mouth a little bit at a time.

He looks all better after letting out a deep breath. Only then do my nerves settle.

"You ok?" I inquire.

"Is that how you treat a sick person?" He peers at me out of the corner of his eyes.

I feel a pang of guilt but I mustn't lose this battle. "You could've dodged it, really. You expect me to believe that you couldn't even do that?"

"I didn't think you'd actually hit that hard though."

I scoff and get up to unfasten his cloak. "Whatever. Just go to sleep if you're not feeling well."

He's still leaning on the bed with a small grin. Suddenly he locks onto my hands. I frown as I try to break free but he doesn't budge.

"Sleep with me," he adds with a friendly expression.

The hell? This guy's pushing his luck here.

Maybe detecting my mood, he grins. "Don't get the wrong idea. I'm ill and I've just gotten wounded again by you. Don't you think I need someone to look after me?"

Wounded by me? What a load of bullshit! Considering his physique, he should be fine by now. What a big, fat liar.

"How could you be so ungrateful?" His smile fades as he looks at me seriously. "I stayed by your bedside every one of those times you got hurt."

I'm a bit caught off guard and he continues before I get to say anything, "Don't worry. I can't do much in my state right now so I won't be trying anything funny."

I shoot him an angry look. "Then where am I supposed to sleep? 'Cuz I am not sleepin' on the ground!"

He beams as he shifts over a little. "How 'bout here?"

Wh-what? I sincerely feel like beating him up right now.

"Here, or the ground," he offers as he pats the bed, "Your choice. Don't come running to me later saying I didn't give you any."

I take a look at the warm and soft bed. I take another look at the cold floor. I take one last look at that crafty asshole.

Fine, then.

I take my shoes off and sit by the edge of the bed.

He raises a brow in discontent. "What're you doing all the way over there? We can't even talk properly. I'm a nice guy; I don't bite."

I roll my eyes at him.

Hmmph! It's not like you haven't before.

His face looks sallow under the murky, shaky candlelight. The dark circles under his eyes make him look tired but it doesn't take away from his usual air.

It's gotten late and it's dead silent outside. The two of us are still awake, also silent.

"Han Xin?"

I hum a reply.

"Do you do this kinda stuff a lot?" He asks, his voice coming from my side, "Serving others?"

I turn away. "I've always had to take care of myself so I don't mind it in particular."

"Always?" He turns too. I can kind of smell his scent from behind.

I feel a rush of bitter pain gnawing at my heart and I shut my eyes.

"Got used to it," I answer nonchalantly, "Living under someone else's roof and all."

I feel someone tucking me in carefully, making sure to get all the crevices. Soon I'm surrounded by that familiar scent of his. I glumly turn my head away, not wanting to open my eyes. I feel an arm wrapping around my waist and fingers starting to stroke the hair by my temple. Extremely lightly but extremely clumsily. So gently. So gently it's as if he's a completely different person.

I don't think anyone has ever made me feel this way in the past twenty years. Not even close.

I have no idea why Uncle always looks so coldly at me, no idea why I don't have any parents and no idea why certain people give me such strange looks.

The empress dowager's surname is Han. Uncle's surname is Han. My surname is also Han. Then who was my father? Why couldn't I receive my father's name? For what reason did I have to take my mother's? Why can't I remember the things before I was nine?

Usually I would make sure I don't think about these because I know that's just asking for trouble. When I had asked Uncle these questions when I was young, he got so angry he was shaking and locked me in the log shed. I got used to it in the end. I wouldn't think. I wouldn't ask.

It seems there's a whole lot I don't know.

I smile but I'm filled with bitterness.

You don't have a past, Han Xin, or a future.

I feel tears wetting my eyes.

Thanks to the darkness, I can cover my tracks as long as I don't make a noise. Everything will be silent. I've got no need to hold back.

The tears keep streaming out, wetting my cheeks. I feel a cold finger reaching up to my face and wiping at my tears. His scent gets closer and finally envelops me.

“Let it out if you want. You don’t have to hide anything. I won’t judge.”

I spit a quiet curse while trying to push him away. He lets out a sigh before hugging me close and putting his chin against my neck.

“Go away! You hear me?”

With my eyes closed, I try to pry his hands off but he only holds me tighter and tighter, not letting me fight. Feeling my tears being gently kissed away, I finally give up struggling and wrap my arms around his shoulders.

It doesn’t matter now. All I want is a little warmth. Even if it’ll be gone the next instant, I’d be fine with that, too.

He’s gently patting my back while comforting me quietly by my ears, “You’ll feel better after you cry.”

“You’re not me.” More tears. “How would you know?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Silly. No one can be cheerful all the time.” He sighs. “You must have so much bottled up.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Okay, okay. ‘Nuh-uh’ it is.”

His hand is still patting my back. Gently. Lightly. I quickly settle down and open my eyes. His smoldering eyes are watching me like the stars on a cloudy night. I try to communicate the thoughts I can’t speak through my eyes.

I bury my face in the nook of his shoulder and let my eyes close while taking in his faint scent.

“All good now?” He asks.

I give a small nod and hold him tighter. He chuckles and then takes off my cloak before pulling the blankets back. “No more tears, right? Then let’s go to sleep,” he coaxes.

His body heat sneaks in through the thin fabrics. I rest on his shoulders, listening to his muffled heartbeat. He suddenly dips down and plants a kiss on my forehead with his cold lips. Lightly. Slowly. Extremely gently.

I’ve cried. I’ve shed tears, too. But my heart is still weighed down to the point it’s a little painful.

“Sleep now. I’ll be with you.”

Everything falls silent once more. Soon I let my lids fall down like black curtains with his light snoring in the background.

After some time...

I turn my head, bewildered, only to see the sky painted brilliantly orange by the fiery sun. The blue sky seems to have been ignited with gold and fiery red clouds. There’s farmland off in the distance being burnt away by roaring flames. A wave of cavalymen in black helmets rides past on white horses, whizzing by me like the wind. There’s a handsome man in a black helmet and red cape mounted on a warhorse, magnificent blade in hand. I can’t quite make out his face but the

bloody stain by his lips stands out to me. In the blink of an eye, a sword is drawn and red rains down in every direction. The smell of blood drifts up my nose. My mind seems to implode with a boom and my chest pains as if it's going to tear open.

The scene before me blurs.

A young woman clad in green cotton is kneeling before a splendidly dressed older woman, her pretty face wet with crystal-like tears. She's pleading with all her might, her body huddled against her knees. The older woman remains emotionless behind a curtain of extravagant beads dangling in front of her forehead like a mien of bereavement. The cotton-clad young woman smiles through her tears and rises. She looks up and flicks her wrist up. The same moment, a blade flashes and she falls over limply, a stream of red flowing out from her neck.

I back away in horror. Unbearable pain attacks me like a wild beast. The scene before me vanishes.

I struggle in the dark. I thrash as if it's the end of the world.

What is this?

What in the world is this? I don't want to see it. I don't want to. I don't want to!

Let me die. I don't want to live anymore. Just let me die!

I howl in pain. It's as though my brain is being stung open. My body convulses. Why won't you just let me die?!

"Wake up! Wake up!"

I snap my eyes open. A chill sets in, cooling my hands and feet. I try to move but I get held back. Murong Yu takes me into his embrace and wipes away the sweat on my forehead.

I turn my head away and pant breathlessly. I'm so exhausted but I'm afraid to close my eyes. What if I see those two bloodied people again?

It was a nightmare—a perplexing nightmare.

He takes my fingers into his hand and start rubbing them while whispering sweet nothings into my ear. I lie quietly in his arms, desperately seeking his body heat.

"Murong Yu," I finally manage to croak.

"I'm right here," he answers softly.

Even his hot breath somehow eases my unsettled heart.

"You weren't sleeping well. Kept thrashing around and screaming." He watches me as he rubs my back. "Did you have a nightmare?"

I'm not even sure whether I give him an answer or not, but I wrap my arms around him and whisper, "Hold me tight."

I feel him shudder against me but he doesn't speak. He just takes off my sweat-soaked clothes and throws them out the drapes before taking off his own and bringing me closer than ever.

"Don't be afraid. I'm right here."

Our naked bodies come together and slowly I start to warm up, the terror from earlier receding away. I fall asleep in his embrace.



Great Yan was established through martial means, in particular through the art of fire, and has esteemed the colour red through all generations.

The flags of the Yan army cover everywhere the eyes can see. The glaring red seems to swallow up the world as if the army has hailed from the skies. The picture is overwhelming.

A black and red war flag flaps wildly in the wind. The white wolf upon it seems to come alive under the golden sunlight and howl in the wind. The Three Wings are fully armed and stand parted in the middle. The jet black handle and tassels of the soldiers' spears form a forest. Only the silver blades reflect cold, menacing light that seems to shoot through your soul.

The flag of the wolf draws near and a man with deep contours comes forth, armoured in shining iron plates. He grins as he strolls through the forest of spears and stops before Murong Yu. Murong Yu is sitting at the end of a long table, adorned with a silver helmet and red cape as usual. The top half of his face remains hidden in the shadows of his helmet. His expression is hard to identify but his lips are tightly pursed as always.

The man kneels down on one knee and the men behind him follow suit, their metallic armour clanging against the ground, the sound sharp and hollow. The man raises his hands and lifts a gilt-edged scroll sealed with wax above his head.

"A decree written by His Majesty, Emperor of Great Yan," he declares in a clear voice. "The Lupine Blood Mounts under my command shall be entrusted entirely to Prince Lie⁴⁶! The Prince shall expand our borders to the utmost without fail!"

Murong Yu's lips curve at an angle, a steady smile showing through the shade.

The Lupine Blood Mounted Squadron is a cavalry that directly answers to the Yan Emperor. All of them armoured in red iron plates have proven their courage on the battlefield, striding over their opponents' mangled remains and polishing their mail with the shed blood of their enemies.

They are a pack of merciless wolves that will do whatever it takes to take down their prey, and that man is none other than Yuwen Yuan, the general of the Lupine Blood Mounted Squadron.

He was born into a family of Yan nobility and is a warrior so fierce, he murders and raids, buries war prisoners alive and massacres commoners, all without a moment's hesitation. I'm afraid his arrival along with the Lupine Blood Mounted Squadron means the Yan Emperor has put all his chips in.

I gaze at the scene. It's sunny, the skies are clear, yet I'm shivering.

The Lupine Blood Mounted Squadron—it had once swept across the Yan borders, cutting down everything in its way. It had trampled beneath its steeds flesh and bone; it had forked upon its blades heads. Numberless states and tribes have cried out beneath its mighty hooves and trembled beneath its gleaming blades. And now, this bloodthirsty beast has turned its glistening fangs towards Great Rui that is still catching its breath, and is biding its time.

Yuwen Yuan grins and quickly turns towards all the men behind him. “We shall follow Prince Lie until our deaths, crush all the enemies before us and expand our borders to the utmost!” He bellows.

“Crush all enemies! Expand our borders!” The soldiers wave their weapons in the air and howl to the sky, shaking the earth itself.

The shouting gets louder each time around but Murong Yu stays unflinching with a light smile on his face and a sword hilt in his right hand.



Murong Yu had called for a feast to be made in the evening to welcome Yuwen Yuan and the Lupine Blood Mounts.

The evening winds are thick with the smell of alcohol. The smell of roast meat makes the mouth water. Murong Yu heads the table and toasts to Yuwen Yuan who isn't far away. Once in a while there are drunken soldiers bumping into and hollering at each other, laughing and singing without restraint.

I keep walking, past the Central Wing Camp, past Murong Yu's quarters, all the way to the back of the yard. The laughter and noise from the welcome party is far behind me, the luminous lanterns naught but small dots twinkling vaguely in the background.

The back of the yard doesn't have a wall; I can spot the vast plains in the distance. There's not a sound. It's so quiet it's suffocating. It's so dark it's suffocating.

The sun has long set. Even the dazzling twilight has dissipated into the sky, the remaining glow fading out slowly until all that's left shining upon the deserted land is the cool, clear moonlight.

I might have decided to escape right now if I were the Han Xin from the time of my capture. Now, however, I wouldn't even consider it because I know that beyond this seemingly peaceful piece of grassland are murderous Yan soldiers.

I take out a small bottle. The light fragrances of wine not unlike that of pears fill my nostrils the moment I twist open the lid. I tilt the bottle upside down as I start quaffing it down. This is the most famous wine of Yan, Jade Green Soul, and is the hardest of hard liquor. A burning sensation arises as the cool liquid slides into my mouth. I take big gulps as though to drown the bitterness in my heart.

Am I...in denial?

The bottle gets lighter and lighter. I tilt my head back to get that last bit when my hand closes in on itself—the bottle's gone!

Someone has taken it from behind. I bark at them without sparing a look, “Givit back!”

“But brother, alcohol's bad for you!”

“Bad? Doesn't matter.”

Yeah, it really doesn't matter. I'd rather die of intoxication than live in vain. I can't do anything but watch these people who are going to trample over my country and murder my people. Watch them feast and indulge themselves before mounting their horses, arming their swords and charging at my country like a pack of hungry wolves. Watch while I cannot do anything.

I roll around shakily. I can't see through my misty eyes so I squint and put on a smile. "C'mere hun, pass me that bottle."

Xiao Qinyun jumps out from behind, shaking the bottle frustratingly. I lunge for it but she steps out of the way.

"Brother! Do you know what this is? How could you drink that much?" She shoots me a disapproving look.

"It's just Green Soul from Yan. What's the big deal!"

"This is so strong that people have died drinking it! You can't do this even if you're a man!"

I wobble a bit as I look at her and shake my head like a drunken man. I reach for the bottle again but she remains determined, swinging her arm up. The liquor splashes out and hits me all over the face.

"I've always hated drinkers!"

I instantly sober up quite a bit after the chilly wine hits me. I see Xiao Qinyun standing in front of me with a troubled look, wearing a light-coloured dress and holding a *xiao*⁴⁷ in her left hand. My feet start feeling shaky after I cough a few times so I rest on a rock nearby. I finally catch my breath with my head propped up with my right hand.

I look up and question, "What're ya doing here instead of joining them?"

She tosses the bottle and it tumbles away, spilling out the last few drops of wine and adding a sliver of its fragrance into the brisk evening wind. She sits down right next to me. I gaze into the distance as she watches me with those round, raven eyes of hers.

I chuckle. "I heard ghosts roam in dark places like this."

"Brother!" She yelps and raps me lightly. "And here I was so worried for you! How could you scare me like that?"

I don't want to laugh anymore. I just can't anymore.

"Go back inside," I order glumly. "It's too windy here for a girl."

She stubbornly shakes her head and moves even closer to me.

The clouds and stars in the skies above the frontiers are thin and sparse. The moonlight shines down and coats everything in a light silvery gleam.

Out of nowhere, Xiao Qinyun hooks onto my arms like a kid and puts her head on my shoulder. I put my head down on my hand and leave her be.

"I know, brother," she starts speaking faintly. "It's hard on you and you don't wanna be near those people. I really don't like them either. So rude and loud, every one of them. And then they start shouting when they get drunk like they're crazy. I don't know how my sweetie can stand them."

"Silly you...." I murmur. To her or to myself? I'm not sure.

Those soldiers who are enjoying themselves and having the time of their lives are the enemies who are soon going to storm over the lands of Great Rui, while I'm here, helpless, not able to do anything except drink to ease my troubles.

I put my hand over my face so she doesn't see the pained look on it.

But what am I now? I'm just a prisoner whose fate is in someone else's hands. I'm afraid my name has already been written on some casualty report. No one would remember me, and that includes my so-called relatives.

Han Xin, oh, Han Xin, I utter to myself, what a dilemma you're in right now. You can't return to your country nor can you leave. It doesn't look like your dream of abandoning all worldly matters and leaving everything behind to become a free soul is going to come true anymore.

So.... So what do you reckon you should do?

Are you going to keep living like this and wait for destiny's final call?

Are you going to take that? Are you?

I shut my eyes tightly and inhale sharply. I feel the alcohol buzzing within me along with all the frustrations and anger that I had kept bottled in and is lurching around wildly.

"Brother?" She sounds worried and starts shaking me. "Brother?"

I'm in a stupor. I don't even want to answer.

The evening wind scoops up sand and rattles the branches as it sweeps across the earth.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" I blurt out harshly.

She stares at me, only releasing my shirt after some time.

I pull a forced smile as I look at her. "Let me be alone for a bit, my Duchess."

She lets her arm fall limply to her side and gets up. She says after a short silence, "You might think I'm just a kid, brother, but I...I know why you're like this."

I close my eyes and sigh silently.

Her words make me all the sadder. So sad I can't breathe.

Her light footsteps get quieter and quieter. I open my eyes to see her petite figure almost disappearing into the dark from the corner of my eye.

"Long time no see, Duchess," A man's deep, rich voice breaks the peace.

I immediately leap up. Xiao Qinyun lets out a yelp before quickly covering her mouth.

The man, armoured in shining iron plates, steps out from the shadows.

⁴⁵ 亥 (*hai4*) is the 12th and last sign in the Twelve Earthly Branches and is used to represent the last double-hour in a traditional Chinese day, corresponding to 9:00 pm – 11:00 pm. This sign corresponds with the Pig zodiac as it is also the 12th and last in the cycle of zodiacs.

⁴⁶ 烈 (*lie4*) is the name of Murong Yu's peerage, literally meaning intense, strong or violent.

⁴⁷ A vertically-blown flute usually made of bamboo.

XIV: A Xiao's Melody

Yuwen Yuan slowly bows down before Xiao Qinyun. “My Duchess.”

She immediately regains her composure and replies with a smile appropriate for a duchess. “General Yuwen, you’re too courteous. I’m not worthy of your politesse.

He quickly scans me with a smile that’s not quite a smile before handing her a letter sealed with gold wax. “This is a letter for You from His Excellency, the Left Minister.”

She grins to show her gratitude. “Your hard work is appreciated, General.”

She fingers the envelope but doesn’t open it and moves a bit towards me. “I give you my thanks.” She pauses and looks in the direction behind him. “You should be drinking with His Highness, right? So what brings you...?”

“It’s going to be a busy day tomorrow and I did not want to forget about His Excellency’s message. I brought it for You as soon as I remembered but I was surprised You weren’t in Your quarters.” He pauses. “I was also surprised to find You out here of all places....”

She smiles and says, “I was bored and came out for a stroll.”

He narrows his eyes and studies me, his eyes eerily bright. “Why, of course. The army life can be quite lacking. It’s normal that the duchess should feel bored. But, who might this be?”

She falters but her smile comes back in the blink of an eye. She steps forth and turns to me, explaining, “Allow me to introduce. This is General Yuwen of Great Yan.” She turns to him.

“And this is....”

She stops short in the middle of her sentence and turns to face me. She looks to me, not knowing what to say. I pucker my lips, not knowing what to say either. It’s true, though. My status here is just too awkward.

I look up at his brooding gaze. I think over it twice before choosing the most cautious explanation. “I am a deputy general serving under General Zhou Zhenluan of Great Rui. Han Xin is my name.”

“Zhou Zhenluan, huh. I’ve crossed paths with him.” The corners of his mouth lift up slightly. “As for you,” He scoffs. “You’re naught but a prisoner.”

I smile back at him. “Then you didn’t have to ask, General, since I am just a prisoner.”

He clasps his hands behind his back and paces forward. "However, I do know a thing or two about the Han clan of Great Rui." He scrutinizes me. "Those of political families, all they do is start conflicts and disputes. All they know is how to deceive and cheat. You're the same, not knowing shame even after getting captured. Not only are you here completely unharmed, you still have the mood to horse around when your country's about to perish."

I try to keep in the anger brewing within me and ignore his words.

He sneers. "The men of Rui aren't too good at fighting but sure are skilled at dogging women around."

Xiao Qinyun chews on her lips before stiffening her backbone. She tilts her head up defiantly. "General, you-."

But Yuwen Yuan shoots her a glance and brushes her aside. I watch quietly as he strides towards me. He's so close that I can even feel the coldness of his iron armour. The moonlight illuminates his menacing face.

"I strongly advise that you reconsider your position and do not complicate matters for His Highness."

I stay quiet.

I know exactly what Yuwen Yuan is talking about. My being here is a variable in and of itself.

The sky darkens and faint torch lights flicker from afar.

I take a deep breath and speak as steadily as I can, "I thank you for your advice, General."

I'm not in the mood to compete with him. I only want to get rid of this plague of a man as soon as possible so things don't get complicated.

Xiao Qinyun's face is red with indignation and her frame is shaking, her head lowered and lips pursed. Yuwen Yuan is looking me up and down when she exclaims, "General Yuwen, you've been mistaken. He's the one who saved my life!"

Yuwen Yuan glances sideways at her. "You probably aren't aware of the treacheries people can harbour, my Duchess. Not to mention, it's a critical period right now. I must ensure the safety of You and His Highness."

Suddenly Xiao Qinyun cuts in front of me and faces him straight on. "I am grateful for your consideration, General, but this matter is between us. I would appreciate it if you did not get involved."

The atmosphere changes drastically. Yuwen Yuan shoots me a dangerous look. I've already sobered up quite a bit with all the talking. I catch his hand reaching towards his waist and caressing his sword hilt out of the corner of my eye. My heart starts to race.

"Look at you. Even have the duchess on your side now."

I reach out and scoop Xiao Qinyun behind me protectively. I chuckle nervously after seeing Yuwen Yuan's stony face. "There's no such thing. I am a prisoner unworthy of the duchess' care. It is just that the duchess has a kindred heart."

Yuwen Yuan scoffs after a moment. "Oh? Is that so?"

“The noble duchess is only sparing us commoners her generosity—you’re over-thinking it, General.”

A warning bell goes off in my head as soon as I see his face tense up. With no time to think, I turn slightly to the side and lean back along with the momentum, avoiding his strike. The speed of his strike is extremely high and its power even more so. I feel a sharp stream of air hit my face.

If I hadn’t dodged it, at least half of my face would swell up.

“Surely you must know the rules as a prisoner, Han Xin. I did not give you permission to dodge.”

It is as they say: Those who approach have no good intentions; those who mean well do not approach⁴⁸.

“I don’t believe I have done you any disrespect, General. Why did you strike?”

Yuwen Yuan glances sideways at me and snickers. “There aren’t many people who can evade my attacks. I hadn’t thought you were lying low this whole time. Please, allow me to observe your skills.”

‘Observe?’ Don’t take me for a fool.

His attack just now was swift like lightning and full of force. It’s apparent that he wasn’t holding back at all. I might be a prisoner but I don’t want to be beaten for no good reason either. That’s why I dodged it using the martial arts the old geezer taught me. I didn’t think it would lead to this.

Haaah... I would’ve let him hit me if I had known. It’s no use now even if I did.

Nonetheless, I’m still trying. “My martial skills are crude, General. I would not be a worthy opponent. I impetrate your generous pardon, please.”

“Really?” A slow smile spread on his face.

A look full of menace!

I see the snow white flash of a blade and it’s coming straight for me. I hear a scream from behind me.

Shit!

I turn sideways and push Xiao Qinyun away. I snatch the *xiao* away from her hand and rush to face him without hesitation, smartly guiding the impetus of his sword aside. His expression darkens and he drives his sword back around with a snap of the wrist.

How troublesome. I hadn’t thought he would draw his sword so soon and I didn’t have a suitable weapon. I only used the *xiao* because of the urgency of the situation. There is no way it would last against his sword.

“General! Stop! Stop now!” Xiao Qinyun shouts at us as she gets up.

None of us answer, however, as we are fully concentrated on the battle between sword and *xiao*. Yuwen Yuan’s manoeuvres are strong and fierce, one attack tightly followed by another, while I whisk the *xiao* and make it dance nimbly along with its tassel, flicking in and out of sight. We’re evenly matched for now.

Beads of sweat form on my forehead.

This is obviously not a fair fight. *Xiaos* are originally musical instruments and cannot endure a drawn-out battle. Yuwen Yuan's moves are relentless and harsh. I couldn't directly engage with him with only a *xiao* in hand, neither can I truly fight back. I have the wolf by the ears.

I meet with his blade sometimes and retreat other times while he continues to advance. The blade scrapes across the *xiao* with an ear-splitting scratching sound, glistening as it shimmers before my eyes.

What the heck does he want from me?

He inhales deeply and swings his sword back around, its blade flashing dangerously. I swerve to the side to elude it and I thrust the *xiao* forward along the blade, striking sparks as I aim straight for his neck.

He frowns and immediately sidesteps, skimming out of the way. Raising his long weapon, he brings it down with incredible force. The ivory blade tip slashes open the night with the help of the moon and heads directly for me. I bite down in concentration and change my footing, swaying half a *chi*⁴⁹ out of harm's way. Missing its target, the sword tips his balance as he is not able to retract the motion in time.

I'm breathing somewhat erratically now that I have been on the defensive the entire time. The alcohol that I had consumed is not helping either. No time to speak—I've spotted my chance. Using the gap that his sword has given me, I strike the *xiao* exactly on his right wrist.

The *xiao* doesn't do much damage by itself but I had put in all my strength in that one hit and it had struck a critical joint. His face darkens as he sweeps violently back towards me, lips tightly clipped. I manage to take two steps back before he switches the blade's directions and it flies towards me. I pivot as a gust of wind blows past and I see a metallic flash before my eyes. It's too late to dodge so I bring the *xiao* up to stop it. The two weapons clash in midair. With a turn of the wrist, I push on the sword. He no longer is able to bear the weight of his weapon after the hit on his wrist so I apply more force. The *xiao* shoots out of my hand and draws a long arc in the air before planting into the ground along with his sword.

The two of us leap apart. Neither of us makes another move. We just stand there panting.

I bring my hands together in front of my chest after I've composed myself. "You went easy on me, General."

His expression only gets stormier and stormier by the second. He glares menacingly at me. It's a look full of threat and danger.

I let out a breath. "I'd said that my martial arts are crude. Naturally, I wasn't going to be a worthy opponent for you. I was lucky to receive your mercy. I owe you my gratitude, General."

Beggars can't be choosers. I'm just saying a few nice words because I don't want to anger him just yet.

He doesn't say anything.

We're in a bit of an awkward situation here when someone's low voice interrupts it.

"Spectacular."

I turn to see Murong Yu pacing out from the shadows.

“Your Highness.” Yuwen Yuan bows and I follow suit.

“Enough,” he says nonchalantly. He turns and catches my eye, seeming to look deep into my eyes. I quickly drop my gaze and keep it lowered.

“General Yuwen, I had invited you to wine and yet you left without permission?”

Yuwen Yuan’s expression is one of respect as he replies. “The Left Minister charged me with the responsibility of delivering a letter to the duchess. I came looking for the duchess only because I did not wish to delay the message.”

Murong Yu smiles softly. “Then let us return to the wine since it has been delivered.”

A smile creeps onto Yuwen Yuan’s face. “This is a military base, Your Highness, yet You still let the duchess wander around freely?”

Murong Yu takes a glimpse of the dumbfounded Xiao Qinyun and says almost nonchalantly, “The duchess was already playful and mischievous when she was in the capital. Not even His Excellency, the Left Minister, could rein her in, so I think I will spare the efforts trying.”

Then he turns to her. “What are you still standing there for? Leave this instant!” His volume isn’t high but his tone is awfully harsh.

She gnaws on her lips, takes a look at me and then at Murong Yu before trudging off into the dark.

Yuwen Yuan retrieves his sword from the ground and sheathes it after wiping it off.

“Perhaps Your Highness is being too imprudent.” He moves his gaze from Murong Yu to me. “Allowing a prisoner to wander freely as he wishes in a military base.”

“I have uses for him precisely because he is a prisoner.” Murong Yu’s expression stays unchanged. Yuwen Yuan tries to speak but Murong Yu cuts him off coldly. “General, it is I who is the Grand Marshal of this army.”

Yuwen Yuan stops and turns to me instead. “I understand very well, Your Highness.” He snickers. “But surely You have not forgotten about His Majesty’s edict. All prisoners must be sent back to the capital in chains under General Tuo’s supervision in the near future.”

Murong Yu’s face clouds over and he turns away with a flick of his sleeves. “Of course I have not. Your reminder is unnecessary!”

The news hits me like a bombshell.

Wh-what? All prisoners sent back to the capital in chains? N-n-no...no way!

In Yan tradition, a large number of prisoners are always sent back to the capital in chains and those include royalty and nobility, the rich and wealthy. The emperor would then bestow the prisoners onto the upperclassmen and soldiers according to their accomplishments in the war and allow them to do as they please with the prisoners.

It’s needless to say what would happen to me if I were sent there in chains but there’s nothing more I can do but sigh.

Murong Yu shoots a cold look at Yuwen Yuan before leaving. Yuwen Yuan looks down on me amusingly. I can see the disdain and disregard from his eyes as if to say: ‘You’re just a prisoner. What does it matter if you’ve beaten me? I can end your life with a few words if I wished so.’

I bite down on the inside of my lip as I feel cold sweat sliding down my back. I hadn't even felt this unsettled when I was fighting him.

I stoop down to pick the *xiao* up from the dirt after watching them leave. I study it carefully under the moonlight. The body is dark brown and probably was flawless and glossy before getting cut all over by Yuwen Yuan. Even the tassel that was hanging from it is nowhere to be found. I let out a sigh and take a seat on the ground.

Too bad. It was a good *xiao*, too.

I'll get her a new one if I get the chance.

I let my eyes flutter close, hold my breath and focus. I then place the *xiao* lightly against my lips. I've picked up a few so-called useless skills straying through the red-light district.

The notes of the *xiao* slowly begin to unfurl under the lucid moon, like birds whirling about in the warm, gentle spring air, playfully chasing the April sunshine. Then it plunges sharply into the drizzling seasons of autumn. The limpid notes drift idly along, twisting and turning through sunsets and moonsets, tempests and gales, playing the sorrows of farewell.

My vision blurs and my mind drifts off for a moment.

I've been constantly enduring since getting captured; enduring physical pain, enduring the pains of not being able to return to my country, and enduring the contemptuous looks of those around me, all just so I can live on.

It's easy to die proudly but it takes even more courage to live through the pains.

And what about my country?

The state is about to collapse with no one to uphold it. Is everything that is Great Rui really going to crumble into a handful of sand underneath the pounding of the Lupine Blood Mounts? Am I supposed to watch idly as my country and its beautiful land get stamped on by heartless, violent people like Yuwen Yuan?

I see a scene of disaster before my eyes: fully armed Yan cavalry slashing away at the innocent lives of Great Rui citizens as they gallop through, leaving blood flowing like rivers and corpses covering the land....

I dig down hard with my fingers and a series of sharp trills rudely breaks the previous dejection like clashing metal, bringing the broadness of the boundless, yellow desert, the boldness of the mighty, bellowing oceans and the winded neighs of fully armoured horses. The notes climb higher and higher, soaring straight into the empyrean, valiant like heroes, whizzing past like a dancing sword and crying out like a warhorse.

Eeeeeek! The melody splinters into pieces, leaving faint echoes behind.

I let out a deep breath. I feel like my blood's boiling. My clothes are soaked with sweat. I'm so tired I don't even want to speak.

And what about my heart?

Can I still be carefree like before?

But the fate of a country lies upon every single one of its citizens.

Maybe I'm just hiding, hiding from my responsibilities.

Responsibilities? I scoff.

What are my responsibilities? Could someone please tell me?

Rescuing Great Rui is something I'm not capable of. I cannot do anything. Anything.

Kin from the maternal lineages have been amassing power ever since the demise of the Former Emperor, leaving the paternal lineage with little authority. The nobles and the wealthy fight each other for power and money. No one tends to the welfare of the people. The civil officials embezzle at all levels of government and the martial officials hold onto their forces and keep to themselves. Capable and talented men aren't used to their full potential. The court has long been corrupt. Skirmishes have continuously plagued the southern and northern borders, yet no one has stepped forth to solve anything.

Even the almighty old geezer gets worked up talking about it, but he still has nothing up his sleeves. So what could I do?

"Han Xin?" I hear Murong Yu's voice from behind.

I smile, not surprised at all. "What may I do for you, your highness?"

His complexion looks extra handsome under the smooth moonlight.

He sits down beside me with a stony expression and only speaks after a while. "It's rare to see you like this."

I hum carelessly as a reply before falling quiet again.

He peers at the *xiao* in my hand. "Tell me, what other talents do you have that I don't know about?"

I turn my head and sigh. "Are you gonna punish me for rubbing Yuwen Yuan the wrong way?"

He shakes his head. "Yuwen Yuan's martial skill is nearly unmatched amongst my men but you tied with him with nothing but a *xiao*. I can't help but be suspicious."

"What's there to be suspicious about? Just a scuffle, is all. I've had my fair share of them back in the day as a Guardian," I say nonchalantly.

"Wait, aren't you supposed to be drinking with him?" I ask.

"We've been done for a long time." He whisks around and snares my wrist. "Don't change the subject. Answer me."

Sharp pain shoots up my arm. He pulls me closer to him. I tremble from the pain and clench my jaw.

"Last time with the duchess. This time with Yuwen Yuan. How did you get captured when you're this skilled?" He glares at me, not letting me escape. "Answer me!"

The painful memories hit me like a roaring wave.

I turn my head away with my eyes tightly closed, not wanting to recall the horrors. "Don't ask me! It's not like your men haven't told you already!"

His eyes flash with what might be fury. He grabs onto my shoulder so violently that it feels like my shoulder blade might shatter.

"I want to hear it from you."

I'm breathing heavily and my lips are tightly sealed.

It's shameful enough to get captured by you and now you want to rub salt in my wounds?

Blood-red seeps across my vision—a colour that makes me shake in terror. I hear the screams of men and horses and the clashing of sabers against swords, unsettling my mind. I start to tremble all over as soon as I start to recall it. It's as if I've been transported back to those petrifying days. I see myself bathed in blood but there's nothing I can do.

"You're shaking. Are you afraid?"

I hold onto his shoulder and open my eyes. "Don't make me. I really don't want to."

"Why?"

"Cause...it's not something you'd call memorable."

He releases his grip a little but keeps gazing at me. I push him away while panting. "Let me have some peace."

He remains quiet for a long time and then suddenly asks, "What were you just playing?"

I touch the *xiao* and answer softly, "*Cries of Soaring Swan Geese*⁵⁰."

"Hmm?"

"It's a piece by filles de joie that tells of their longing for their lover."

His gaze becomes dark. "But when you played it there was a bit of longing for home added in there. There was some fighting spirit in the notes towards the very end."

I chuckle. "Oh really?" I fall back onto the ground and poke him with the *xiao*. "Hey, got any booze?"

He pushes the instrument down and glimpse at me. "You're drunk."

I don't correct him and just look up at the clear night skies. "So what if I'm drunk. So what if I'm sober. What does it matter to you whether I'm drunk or not?"

He doesn't reply but moves a bit closer.

"I'm really impressed that you could tie with him when you're this drunk."

I can't help but giggle at his words and turn to look at him. To be honest, I really want to be left alone right now but it's not all that bad with him here. He's probably the one person that I'm most familiar with in this place. Even if I'd disliked him at first, I can't help but feel close to him after being with him day in and day out for so long. Plus, he's not a bad person. He might be difficult at times, a bit cagey and likes to give others a hard time for no reason, but he's still easy to get along with.

"What a waste it'd be not to get wasted on this beautiful night!" I rap on the grassy ground and feel the evening breeze gliding past with my eyes half-closed.

He frowns and places his hands on mine. "Don't drink. You should be more careful after messing with Yuwen Yuan."

I chuckle as I push his hand off, "Careful? Gimme a break. I was already on his bad side since the start."

"Why do you say that?"

I take a glance at him. "You should've seen how he was looking at me like the duchess and I had an affair or something, like he was afraid we were gonna cuckold you by rendezvousing in the

middle of the night.” He looks tongue-tied while watching me. I stretch my arms and legs and continue lazily, “Doesn’t matter though. He seems pretty respectful of you. Not as arrogant as they say he is.”

“Of course. We’re both martial people. But the person he’s loyal to is still Father,” he explains flatly.

He lowers his eyes, the moon sketching out a picture of melancholy. I spot loneliness meandering in those eyes of his.

A child born into the house of the emperor undoubtedly has a halo of high-status but how many people would know of the lonesome soul that is shadowed by that ring of light? I can tell after being around him these days that he’s very lonely, yet he won’t trust anyone around him. That’s why he has always been lonely, and maybe this lonesomeness shall accompany him for the rest of his life.

For some odd reason I suddenly sit up and lean slightly towards him. “Do you want the throne, Murong Yu?”

His expression doesn’t change. He only turns to look at me. I feel my smile falling apart and I start to panic.

Why did I say that? Whether he’s lonely or not, whether he’ll fight for the throne or not, those are all his problems. What’s it have to do with me?

I’m about to change the subject when a tiny spark lights up in his eyes, only to be gone the next moment.

“I do,” he says through clipped lips.

My breathing hitches. I hadn’t expected him to just say it like that.

“You’re the first person to ask me so directly.” He steadily watches me with a ghost of a smile on his lips. Then he laughs, loudly but coldly, so coldly that I don’t even think it counts as a laugh. “The throne to an empire—now which man wouldn’t want that?”

I look on, dumbstruck.

Just how many heroes have met their ends because of these five words? This person in front of me, he isn’t just a hero on the battlefield. He may very well hold the *jus vitae necisque* and preside at the top.

We are two kinds of people.

“That’s good.... At least you have the ambition, unlike me, always so lazy and idle.” I clap his shoulder. “Don’t forget about your buddy when you become emperor, ‘kay. No pretending to not know me.”

“Lazy and idle?” He puts an arm over my shoulders. “What’re you tryin’ to hide now?”

I touch my face confusedly. What? What have I tried to hide? And why is he saying that?

He sighs while staring at me, a faint hint of concern flashing across his eyes. He reaches up and touches the spot between my brows, his voice more gentle than ever before. “You think your disguise is very good, don’t you? Always acting carefree and calm? But I can see it, even during your most cheerful times, the misery that clouds over right here like it’s never going away.”

“Really?”

He nods seriously and pulls me into his embrace. I don’t resist, instead snuggling into a comfortable position. I let out a sigh after settling down.

I had always thought I hid myself very well. Who knew that he’d still...

“Sometimes I see you from behind and I wonder what is it that you’ve been through that is so heavy and secretive that makes you frown even in your sleep.”

I shoot him a disbelieving look and he gives me wholehearted nod. Then I realise that we’ve slept on the same bed many times so it’s no surprise he’s seen me while I was asleep. I wish the earth would just swallow me up when I think about my unsightly sleeping figure.

“The more airily you smile during the day the tighter you furrow your brows at night, like you’re enduring great amounts of pain. I really don’t get it. Why do you have to pretend like you’re fine if it’s so painful? Oh you.... Aren’t you making it hard for yourself?”

Okay, I have to admit that he’s pretty sharp.

I close my eyes wordlessly, feeling his body heat from behind. He wraps both arms around me and surrounds me in his warmth.

His embrace is too warm. I feel like I’m going to drown any minute.

⁴⁸ A close English equivalent can be “beware of Greeks bearing gifts.” I prefer the alternate reading of Sophocles in Ajax: “Foes’ gifts are no gifts: profit bring they none.”

⁴⁹ A unit of measurement for length, approximately 23 cm.

⁵⁰ In Chinese culture, flying swan geese is most associated with their migration, which has become a symbol of the passing of seasons and, consequently, of time.

XV: Recollections

He brushes his fingers slowly over my face. “Could you tell me the things you’re hiding inside and let me help bear some of their weight?” He turns my head to face him and stares intently into my eyes.

Could that be...sincerity in his eyes?

I rub my eyes. I must be too drunk. Just as I try to get up, he pulls me from behind and I topple over into his arms.

He sucks my earlobe. “No running. You won’t be getting away this time.”

His hot breaths that hit my neck make me feel tingly all over. I can’t help but shudder and start breathing more hastily.

“Murong-.”

He closes the gap between us and kisses me without giving me any chance to escape. The next moment I feel his burning lips, his strong arms, his solid, sturdy chest and his scorching breath on my face. Our lips and tongues dance and intertwine while I’m completely trapped in his embrace. My head seems to swirl with heat and my body is becoming hotter. Without much thought, I grab onto his collar as I let his hands, tongue and lips do as they please with my body, not able to resist one bit.

“Mhmnn.”

He mumbles with my lip in his mouth, “No talking.”

I think all the alcohol I have drunk is coming back to me in an instant. We’re tightly pressed against each other. I’m already breathless and my mind is barely hanging on. I close my eyes, my head a spinning mess.

This kiss is so tender, so gentle, so...sweet.

A strange emotion presents itself and muddles my mind to the point I forget where I am.

This kiss is a kiss, nothing more. A kiss full of fondness, adoration, and care. A kiss only between lovers.

Snap! I’m left bewildered as something seems to have shattered inside me. A wave of unfamiliar emotions comes roaring out and drowns me.

This kiss is so wonderful, I think to myself as I lie in his embrace.

He bites hard on my lips, immediately bringing me back to reality. He smiles triumphantly and lets go of my lips.

“No thinking of other things while I’m kissing you,” he whispers.

I pant and try to calm my racing mind with the cold air. The evening breeze blows past my face, reminding me how flushed my cheeks are.

I really wish I was completely drunk—even better if I was unconscious—then I wouldn’t be in this embarrassing position, cheeks burning hot, clothes undone, eyes unfocused, and panting uncontrollably.

He still hasn’t let go of me. I look up and say in the flattest tone I can manage, “You’re the one who’s drunk.”

“Oh, really?” he sneers. His eyes never leave me, dangerous embers flickering in them.

I face away and catch my breath. “Yes.”

His glaring look unsettles me, even making me nervous to the point I don’t know what to do. He puts his hand on the *xiao* and slides down to wrap around my hand.

“Why must you always be so distant?”

A silence.

“I’m not.”

“That’s just for show. The real you isn’t like that.” He comes in close and places his lips on my cheek. “Tell me, is there really no one you can fully trust?”

“Hmm.” I think while trying my best to ignore his scorching lips. Sure, there used to be—like Maid Xiu who used to hold me; like Uncle who would sometimes be nice to me. Like...well, I don’t think there are any more now. I don’t want any either because...because there is no need.

“But aren’t you the same?” I scoff. “Not much better than me, I’d reckon. With a status like yours, with a world like this, you’re destined to be lonely for your whole life, aren’t you? I mean, you don’t even trust your own father.”

I hear him sigh. “In Father’s eyes, I am only half-Yan, even though my surname is Murong.”

I turn back around. He has returned to his usual self so I smile and waggle my finger. “Nay, nay. Just take a look at the Blood Mounts! How could your father have given you the reigns like that if he didn’t trust you?”

He looks at me.

I continue, “You’re really takin’ it for granted. You think he’d let you go to war if he didn’t trust you? You think he’d make you marshal of his army if he didn’t trust you? You think he’d let you marry the Left Prime Minister’s daughter if he didn’t trust you? How could you not see, stupid?”

He stays quiet for a moment before retorting. “It’s not what you think. Why would an emperor let his future heir go to war thousands of miles away? Why would he risk the next emperor’s safety?”

“Alright. So they say the Yan emperor has been ill lately and you’ve been away for such a long time that there’s no way your half-brothers would’ve missed out on that opportunity. But look, has there been any bad news from the capital? There’s always been a constant supply of food for your army of a quarter million all the way in the south. You haven’t gone hungry without food or cold without heat, have you? The duchess couldn’t have come all the way here without the emperor’s consent, could she? And you said it yourself—Yuwen Yuan is only loyal to your father. Yet here he is serving you. Why might that be?”

I punch him. “Look at you, soldier. Your brain has gone dead from all the fighting!”

He remains silent. Then he turns to glance at me. “How could you see that so clearly?”

“Well, like Yuwen Yuan said, political families are always fighting with each other in the dark, cheating and deceiving. I’ve picked up a bit here and there even if I don’t dabble in it.”

Honestly, the political strategies that the old geezer taught me are much more than this but I didn’t pay too much attention because I just didn’t really like it.

“So you don’t want to trust anyone because you know of their schemes and deceptions?”

“Well, not really. It’s just complicated, okay?” I direct my gaze to the clear night skies so I don’t have to see those meaningful glances of his.

The moon is shining nice and bright tonight and bathes his sharp, distinctive features in glowing luminosity that makes them seem more amiable.

“Drinking only thickens sorrow. You don’t have to do this to yourself, Han Xin. You can tell me what’s on your mind. Surely you can trust me after all we’ve been through.”

Soaked in moonlight, he sounds earnest, his voice soothing, and makes me speechless.

I’ve really ran out of words.

What is this thing between him and me?

As a soldier, I know very well we’re rivals and there’s no changing that. Even so, I’ve been getting involved with him since I was taken prisoner. It’s been no use trying to keep my distance from him.

That night, I had been woken by him from the torture of that familiar, tenacious nightmare. His gentle, calming words drifted by my ears. I shouldn’t forget about his comforting embrace either. He kept holding me like that through the night and stayed with me. When I woke again, he had already left. A warm current runs through my chest as I recall this. Perhaps, when such... intimacy is reached between two men, the feelings start changing too.

That night, his every look, every action, every word...

I shake my head furiously as if to cast it all away but to no prevail. Every single detail of that night replays in my mind as clear as crystal, as vivid as if it were happening right this moment.

I feel my face heating up and an indefinable feeling rushing up out of my control. It’s complicated and difficult to tease out. There’s a bit of awkwardness, surprise, panic, uncertainty and a bit of an unknown emotion. My heart feels heavy as if it’s holding something strange.

No!

All of that was a mistake. It was wrong to begin with.

And I can't let it go on.

I cannot-.

He slowly reaches out for my neck and caresses it as if he's been doing it for his whole life. By the time I realise, I'm right up against him and I can hear even the shallowest of his breaths.

I turn and meet his gaze. He's smiling a little but his eyes are scorching like flames and strangely dark, as if containing within them limitless thoughts.

The next moment, something clicks in my mind.

Holy mother of god.

It's obvious that we're both men. The time is wrong, the place is wrong and the person is even more wrong! Nothing has been going right. None of this was supposed to-.

"What's wrong? Your face is all red."

He studies me for a while with a somewhat delightful smirk before taking his hand back. I tilt my head away from his smile. My mind is a mess as I search for a way to end this awkward situation.

I don't speak. He stays quiet, too, and holds my hand.

"Murong, you asked me why I got captured and well, I'll tell you if you wanna hear it."

He murmurs a quiet reply and tightens his grip on my hand.

"Great Rui was established upon scholastics so martial officials often get constrained. Even when they go out to war there's always a civil official keeping tabs by the soldier's side." I lower my gaze and my voice. "General Zhou and Minister Xie have been at each other's throats for a long time so naturally-"

He nods. "That goes without saying."

"Well, the County of Lan An⁵¹ in the northwest had gotten trapped by Yan troops and the man in charge was a nephew of Minister Xie's. He was ignorant, incompetent and had absolutely no hands-on experience. General Zhou disliked him, plus he'd decided to give Lan An up anyways, so he wasn't planning on sending any reinforcements, but the civil supervisor kept pressuring and Minister Xie kept rushing, so...he sent me in the end."

Murong Yu turns to look at me, his eyes scream surprise. "Isn't that asking you to dig your own grave?"

I shrug. "Pretty much. I was ignorant and incompetent, too, in his eyes. Fooled around all day and what not. He was in a tight spot at the time but he had to show Minister Xie *something*. So, taking three thousand footmen with me, I departed."

My vision blurs but the image in my mind is the clearest it has ever been, as if it only happened yesterday.

"And then, we ran into some Yan cavalry before we even made it into Lan An territory. I'm sure you know what it means for footmen to go up against cavalry on flat plains. It's like bringing a knife to a gunfight."

I start shaking nonstop. “That battle fills me with fear even until this day. Scores of soldiers met their ends without even the chance to draw their swords. So much bone and flesh piled on the ground that I couldn’t even see the green grass anymore.”

The memories of what happened after that have always been a bit hazy as though my mind doesn’t want me to remember the terrifying experiences. Endless arrows rained down on us like a storm. The speed at which the Yan cavalry attacked was surprisingly dexterous. Countless blades penetrated our ranks and kept pushing forth while cavalry herded us in on the two sides. Soon, my men were scattered about, their bloodcurdling cries echoing around me.

By the time I had recovered from shock, my troops were in chaotic disarray.

Three thousand lives lay in my hands. One wrong move on my behalf meant life or death for them.

“Luckily, there was a canyon there.”

The Yan cavalry had the upper hand in quality and quantity and had us completely surrounded. I did everything in my power to bring my men together and assembled them in between the two mountains. I placed our provision carts around us and the men in battle formation beyond them. Soldiers in the front held shields and spears while bowmen hid in ambush behind them. The cavalry initiated another attack before first light the next day, charging straight for us. My soldiers in the forefront suffered gravely and were forced to retreat back into formation. At once, our bowmen fired in unison. The Yan soldiers fell like dominoes and they retreated up into the mountains after their losses.

I knew that there was no way we could’ve made it out if we kept fighting head-on.

After an evening’s standoff, I secretly led my remaining men out at the darkest hour.

Immediately, the Yan generals gathered their reinforcements so we could only fight as we escaped towards the southeast because of their incredible speed. But we were footmen with no horses, and even my steed was used to carry casualties, so we were much slower than them. Every step we took we had to fight with everything we had; we left behind us a river of blood. Soon, the Yan cavalry split into two once more and trapped us in between again.

“How many days did it go on for?”

I shake my head. “I don’t remember...I really don’t. I only remember the blood everywhere and the deafening cries.”

As galloping horses criss-crossed in my vision, dozens of heads flew up in the sky.

We suffered heavy casualties after holding out for several days. There wasn’t one person without injuries. Finally, the slaughter temporarily ceased near nightfall and I stood, speechless, with my captain facing the vast, never-ending plains to the southeast.

I feel Murong Yu tightening his grip on my hand.

“I thought you were skilled in the arts.” There is no trace of ridicule in his voice.

“I did study the tactics of warfare but that place was just inconceivable. There had been nothing and there would never be anything. Plus, I couldn’t just leave them.” I clench my jaw while shivering. “I was the one who had brought them to the godforsaken place, to the dead end we were

in. Even if I could ensure my own escape, they trusted me so much—they believed I could lead them out of danger’s harm and return home....”

I breathe out a long sigh filled with sorrow.

Leading my battered, worn-out troops, I launched a counterattack with every scrap I had left, killing one thousand or so Yan soldiers and breaking through their formation. We were on our last breaths, suffering hunger and thirst, but nonetheless, we pushed our leaden bodies on towards the borders.

I really don’t understand why those fearsome cavalry were so stubborn in pursuing an enervated auxiliary force.

Steadily, we left the desert behind us after roughly four, five days of marching and came upon a swampy area with an abundance of reeds. Just as I had sent out orders to rest and reorganize ourselves, the Yan soldiers started a fire with the help of the wind before I even got a sip of water down my throat. The scorching flames unfurled towards us as it crackled and snapped across the terrain.

Red. All I could see was blood red.

After recovering from the initial shock, I instructed my soldiers to fight fire with fire to open up a path for us and speed down south amidst the chaos to get to the hilly areas to the north of Rope Hill Creek first—it was just outside of Rui territory. The Yan cavalry watched us from afar on the hills to the south and sent out their vanguards on a trial attack. We retreated into a forest and fought an arduous close-combat battle, killing several hundred enemies.

The lacklustre moonlight pushed through the trees at the darkest hour of the night, leaving everything in a desolate, silvery haze. The only things in the ink black sky were the weakly winking stellar rays. Lifelessly, the camp fires burned while the wounded soldiers moaned in agony.

I sat on the side of a hill, straightening out my battle robe of which I could no longer tell the colour. Dried blood coated my once-silvery armour and even my sword was dyed dark red.

Quietly, I sighed and started playing with a piece of withered grass I had broken off.

There were soldiers on patrol around me but they looked beyond fatigued and I could even see ghosts of hopelessness in their eyes. I mean, who could’ve been sure that they wouldn’t get killed in their sleep with the Yan forces not far behind us?

I couldn’t.

I let my head droop down. I could even taste the bitterness on my tongue.

Every step we had taken—every step closer to Rui territory—filled me with more despair.

On account of their advantage in numbers, the Yan cavalry kept attacking. Not even one thousand of the three thousand auxiliary soldiers were left. There were no reinforcements coming for us and no ambushes ahead of us. Our supply of arrows was nearly depleted and our horses were almost all dead. The messenger we had sent for help died halfway on his mission. What else could I have done to get them out of there when it was apparent that even the heavens did not spare us pity?

‘Deputy General Han, are we gonna make it outta here alive?’ asked a raspy voice from behind.

'I don't know.' I shook my head.

'We've already made it here. Great Rui borders're only eight hundred *li*⁵² away. You'd said it yourself!'

'I did say that, but now things have changed.'

I have forgotten what he had said after that, too, but strictly speaking, I had nothing to say back to him in the first place.

At that time, what had I said while facing the gloomy grass field?

I think I murmured to myself as I faced southeast.

'One thousand men. If we had twenty more arrows for each then we could make it back.'

And then I chuckled at my own words after I had said them.

'Who'm I kiddin'? In our current state, even ten arrows is outta the question. I'm the highest-ranking soldier in this auxiliary force and all I have is one beat-up sword.'

It was a good day the next day with bright, sunny skies. The two wings of the Yan cavalry had gone ahead of us and cut off our road back to safety. They pelted us with arrows, yelling at us to surrender. We had run out of arrows so we had to abandon all the carts and heavy equipment and proceed on foot. The Yan forces blocked off the mountain pass and came for us from the sides, rolling boulders down the mountain, too. The stones shook the land. Our men were severely injured and were not able to fight anymore.

We lost that battle and we lost it utterly. Maybe the fate of the three thousand men had already been set in stone when we left the frontiers—we were destined to be sacrifice for a battle of politics.

The captain that had been with me the whole way died in front of my eyes. He was cut in half by a cavalryman riding past and his head flew straight into the sky. I watched as the men beside me fell one by one, getting mashed in by horse hooves and howling out of desperation. I could still hear the deafening roars of the Yan soldiers and I felt as if everything was coming apart.

I give up, I had thought. When it came down to it, I did not want to be a prisoner so there was only one choice for me.

I pulled out my sword and put it against my neck. Hopelessly, I smiled one last time. What was the point of fighting if destiny had it all planned out for you?

Unfortunately, someone was faster than me. A Yan deputy general spotted my attempt and quickly hit the blade away from my neck. Yan soldiers rushed forth from all around and trapped me.

What followed was straightforward. The leader of that cavalry force hated my guts since I had killed nearly two thousand special cavalry forces with only three thousand auxiliary forces. He had to interrogate me anyway for information so he made sure to beat me senseless every day. At first, I could still withstand the pain until I became numb to it but I think the bone-splitting pain started to terrorize me when my consciousness started slipping.

After telling my story, I feel as if I've been drained. I close my mouth, not wanting to open it ever again. All I have left in me is exhaustion and fatigue. Murong Yu's hand loosens, tightens, and then loosens again but never lets go.

I feel a palm wiping off the sweat on my forehead. I force a smile. "Thanks."

"I honestly couldn't understand why they had to interrogate you when I first got here. Now I see why." He lowers his voice. "Footmen against cavalry—to be able to last until then and bring down two thousand men, you...are formidable."

I chuckle after heaving a long sigh. "I don't think so. It's just that the strong desire to live is activated in humans in the most dire of situations. I'm not formidable. I just don't wanna die."

"No one would want to die. We all have reasons to live on," says Murong Yu quietly. "It's the same for a prince like me." He turns to look at me with smoldering eyes. "You know, I killed for the first time the year I turned eight."

I do a double take. I don't quite comprehend it.

He purses his lips before spreading his right hand out in front of me.

His fingers are slender and long. I can make out faint bluish veins underneath the pale skin. There are rough markings on the skin in between his thumb and forefinger and countless thick blisters on his knuckles. Those are marks left by the bow and arrow and sword handles.

He opens his mouth and tells me a story about his childhood.

"The Fifth Year of Jian Xiu⁵³, Father rode south, falling numberless enemies, and captured the ancient city of Luo Hua⁵⁴ with ease." His gaze moves to somewhere faraway. "It was autumn. The setting sun was like blood and the west wind was strong."

"I was only eight that year. Clueless, I was standing on a lookout wrapped in a heavy silk and marten fur robe watching Father assemble his soldiers. The fully armoured soldiers were lined up in one long row and their swords, sabers and spears were shimmering under the sunlight. Dust and the scent of iron loomed over the entire city."

"Father had taken me everywhere He went since Mother passed away. I even accompanied Him to war. He would often say, 'We sons of Murong can only grow with a baptism of blood.' I saw Father beckoning to me so I ran over to Him. He passed me a sword and solemnly told me, 'Yu, it is time for you to christen your sword.'"

"The sword was entirely black and the sheath was a gleaming red. I didn't make a sound. I let Father disrobe me and watched as they brought up a child about the same age I was."

He pauses and seems to have lost his train of thought for a moment.

"He was dressed in layers of silk so he was probably a son of nobility. He clenched his jaw stubbornly while he kept his eyes wide open so the brimming tears wouldn't fall out. My palms were wet with sweat, not unlike the ground beneath me that was still wet with blood. Father's roar echoed from behind me, 'Kill!'"

"It was like something dormant within me was awoken in that instant and the bloodlust overtook me. I threw down the sheath and stepped towards the child. The sword tip scratched the

ground as it dragged behind me.” He shakes violently. “Behind me stood Father and nearly one hundred warriors in shiny mail. Before me were faceless prisoners trembling under blades.”

I hold onto his hand tightly, feeling the unusual icy touch.

“That child was no different from the animals that I’d practiced bowmany with. Raise the sword, level the blade, swing and pull—a stream of hot blood burst forth, and he died. His head rolled on the ground. All I felt then was a few spots of warm blood on my face. All I saw before me was grey and red. I didn’t come out of my stupor until Father put my robe back on for me.”

“Father asked me, ‘Yu, are you afraid?’ I shook my head. Father laughed heartily, carried me up into his arms and shouted to me and to everyone, ‘As expected of a son of Murong! He kills and drinks his enemies’ blood without falter!’”

“That day ended in crimson. And when I had my first victory as a general, I stood on a lookout once again and I couldn’t help remembering that child. We were about the same age—we were both kids well before the age of knowing—but our destinies went in two different directions on that evening.”

Murong Yu bows his head. His eyes are tightly shut and his face is contorted in a painful expression. I hold firmly onto his hand and put my arm around him, patting his back.

So it turns out we have equally gruesome pasts.

“I want to be emperor,” he continues, “And unite the lands so no one else has to die because of war.”

I see fleeting images of soldiers moaning beneath hooves, the old and the weak weeping, and that deaf girl who saved me with fat teardrops still streaming down her face.

“You can do it. I believe you.”

“You were right. With a status like mine and a world like this, I’m destined to be lonely for my whole life. I want to stand at the highest place but those who stand at the highest place are always the loneliest. Yet, I still cling onto the hope that one day I’ll meet someone and be with that person and we’ll understand and support each other.”

Slowly, he opens his eyes wherein shines a peculiar hint of something dark. He gazes straight at me as though he has so much he wants to say.

I look up only to clash with his eyes that are deep like wells. I think I know what they want to say.

His eyes are saying: ‘You and I, we’re the same.’

I feel my body and face tensing up, my expression freezing on my face.

Crap! Crap! This is not good!

I want to turn and get up but before I get the chance to act he pulls me over. He turns my face towards him and looks heatedly into my eyes. He carefully spells out three words of fire and passion.

“Han Xin, I like you.”


⁵¹ 瀾 (*lan2*) 安 (*an1*), literally ‘wave calming.’

⁵² Approximately 260km, see 3, footnote 3.

⁵³ 建 (*jian4*) 休 (*xiu1*), literally ‘establishment rest.’ This is one of the era names that Murong Yu’s father has implemented.

⁵⁴ 洛 (*luo4*) 樺 (*hua4*), literally ‘Luo birch,’ Luo being a river located in Shanxi Province.

XVI: Pains of Farewell

he five tiny words strike me like lightning.

My first reaction is to shrink back as though I've been burned. He furrows his brows and holds me back by the waist, not letting me go.

"Xin," he breathes near my face.

"Wait!" I tilt my head away to let the cool wind hit my face. My mind is a murky mess right now as if it's been cluttered up. I can't make sense of anything.

It's not the first time I've seen this kind of thing.

I've been well acquainted with the queer preferences of the wealthy and the powerful, whether I was working in the Golden Guardian, or wandering through the red-light districts or after I became a deputy general in the army. Nowadays, no matter where you go, keeping young boys and playing with male whores no longer is something done under the table. I've gotten used to this fact growing up in a high-ranking official's home.

But I'd never thought this kind of thing would happen to me.

Okay, I admit I haven't amounted to much. I always keep a carefree attitude and never get serious but that's all a facade. I've always looked down on those sons of the rich who put on an act and fool around with others' love.

I look back at Murong Yu.

He's still in the same position as previously. The fire in his eyes seems to have dimmed but it jumps back to life shortly after a spark.

I don't know why he has made such a sudden utterance but now a lot of the questions I had has been answered.

I don't know how much of it is true and how much of it is false either, but I can't afford to get caught up in it either way. If it's false and he just wants to put on a play with me to relieve himself of boredom, then naturally, I would have no interests in costarring. If it's true—all that stuff about understanding and supporting each other—then I must try even harder to avoid it.

He moves his hand up, over my waist, across my chest and finally stops at my forehead, drawing back the stray strands of hair.

“You’re reluctant.”

I crack a bitter smile. “We’re both men.”

“I know,” he replies simply and holds me a bit tighter. “But I just can’t help myself.”

His light breath hits my neck as he whispers by my ear. It’s so warm I almost can’t believe it.

What a familiar scent.

This comforting feeling is so wonderful. When I was wounded, when I had a nightmare and when I was in danger, it was this feeling that kept me company the whole time. I’ve hesitated but now I raise my arms and wrap them around him.

“I like you and I’ll protect you,” he says. “I won’t let another nightmare haunt you when you’re in my arms.”

A smile tugs at my lips. Is that a confession?

If I could, I really wish I could be a normal person and live without being tied down to anything in the world. Just go to some faraway place and spend the rest of my life as a free spirit.

But then I met this guy.

“Murong Yu.”

“Yea?”

“Listen...”

“To what?”

I press a finger to his lips. “Shh. Just listen.”

It’s an autumn evening with clear skies. A cool breeze glides by. The branches and vines in the forest sway in the wind, swishing in the tranquil night. The weeds and grasses out in the plains dance along the wind. Once in a while you can hear quiet neighs of horses.

He flashes a puzzled look at me and I chuckle.

“Do you hear it?”

“The wind.” He perks his ears to listen and then laughs. “But I’ve heard so much I’ve gotten used to it. What’s so special?”

I clear my throat and look off into the distance. “There’s nothing in the world that’s freer than the wind, in my opinion. I got bullied a lot as a kid, and I’d dreamt that I’d leave these mansions and their gates when I grow up and live life like the wind, free to do whatever I wish with nothing to hold me down. I can stop and enjoy the world when I want and when I wanna leave I won’t have anything to miss.”

“Murong,” I pause and look at him. “Don’t you understand? That’s the kinda life I want. You and I, we’re destined to have different paths. You’re the son of heaven. You should be reigning above all and hold the authority over life and death, enjoying glory beyond description. I just wanna be like the clouds or the wild cranes and indulge in the beauties of nature. I wanna be a free spirit with no worries.”

He shakes his head and draws closer, pulling me in tighter.

“In your dreams,” he says in my ear.

Without another word, he keeps hugging me, his heated breath brushing my ear.

I feel my face heating up again—stupid face.

“Han Xin, your wish sounds nice and all, and you’re right. We do have different things in mind. But, men born into this world should follow their destinies and make a name for themselves. Being born into the house of the emperor, it’s inevitable for me. If I don’t fight, there’s no guarantee that they’ll let me be. There isn’t a moment that the power game stops, that is, until you either succeed or die trying. If that’s the case, then I’d rather put in my all. With brains and talents like yours, why don’t you come help me? I can promise you that I will treat the people of Rui as equals when I ascend the throne. Once the lands are united, there won’t be any more suffering from wars and the people can settle down and live a secure life. When that happens, Han Xin, I will grant you whatever you wish, whether it be peerage or the position of minister, or retirement to the countryside. What say you?”

I drop my gaze and say in a hollow voice, “I don’t have any interest in wealth. I only want to live freely away from civilization.”

“I know what you’re worried about. We’re two men from two different countries, not to mention all the other stuff-.”

“Murong Yu, I wanna leave.”

He freezes and stares wide-eyed at me. His words get stuck and stay stuck.

“I’m really tired of it all. I wasn’t made for the political world and neither was I made for the battlefield. I might have a fairly significant background but I still don’t like that kinda life. I’ve been here under an awkward title for long enough and I’ve just rubbed Yuwen Yuan the wrong way. I really don’t know how long I’d last.”

Then for some reason, I chuckle. “I wonder how cold it gets in winter in the Yan capital.”

He pauses before speaking. “I’m not gonna let you go. All this that happened between us...you think you can just put an end to it by saying you wanna leave? Plus, he doesn’t even know that you’re mine.”

“So I can’t let you go.”

I look into his eyes and put my hand on the back of his hand. “So you mean from now on, I’m gonna have to live under your protection for my whole life?”

He drops his head and stays quiet, his gaze wandering restlessly but never leaving my face. “We’re both lonely people. You should know how unbearable it is.”

Yes, we are the same kind of people—completely filled with loneliness on the inside.

We have many other similarities: our personalities may be completely different but inside, we’re the same. We might be careless with trivial matters but we are always calm and rational at critical times.

I drop my gaze so I don’t have to look at him.

I’m not that quick when it comes to relationships but I’m not stupid. I might have never noticed before but who knew that all those little things would seem so evident after he made the last move.

I have never forgotten about Murong Yu’s status and position just as I cannot see through my cloudy past.

“I just hate your mind wandering.”

I hear his unhappy voice. Surprised, I turn and his lips are already aiming for mine, bringing an intense scent. He is relentless and doesn't give me a chance to run. It's not a passionate kiss but a tender one. His breath is like fire and the heat of his lips makes me swoon.

I must admit this guy is really good at kissing.

His arms are still taut, trapping me within his embrace. My mind's starting to blank out again as I feel his lips burn mine. Involuntarily, I even start to reciprocate. He shudders and stops for a moment before pulling me deeper into his embrace and caressing me even more tenderly.

This kiss and this tender caress hold an affection so rich...how could I possibly refuse?

I battle with myself for a second and decide to give up. I tilt my head back to welcome his lips.

Why?

I don't know. All I know is that I'm not taking it passively, nor am I enduring anything.

Am I devoting myself?

I don't know either. All I know is that this kiss is too wonderful. I'm not devoting my everything but I cannot turn away from it.

It seems to last an eternity.

When we let go of each other, we're breathing raggedly. A mystifying feeling seems to unfurl, enshrouding us like fog or smoke.

“Xin.” He looks deep into my eyes.

I regard him and form a ghost of a smile. “Promise me you'll let me leave after tonight.”

He frowns and his lips tighten into a line. I spot fury in his eyes.

“You know I can't stay here long. Neither of us wants to see me getting taken back to the Yan capital as a prisoner. So I'm imploring you: let me go, let me leave this place.”

He cracks a tiny smile yet his eyes are ice cold. “You're leaving me no choice.”

“You know I'm only going to be a burden if I stay here. The duchess, Yuwen Yuan, and all those eyes around you, you might be able to shut them up but you can't stop their heart. Murong Yu, there are more important things for you than me. Your father might love you but he wouldn't allow you to like a man, would he?”

“And the duchess' father. You don't have any support from your mother's side so you're gonna have to rely on your in-laws for support. Are you sure you wanna anger the powerful Left Prime Minister?”

“You're just turning me down.”

“No, I'm merely pointing out the truth.”

And it certainly is the truth.

Murong Yu's power is still too weak. It's still dubitable whether he'll be able ascend the throne with only the Yan emperor's love and his innumerable war merits. He needs his soldier's support and even more so the protection of the powerful and wealthy.

He keeps his strangely shiny gaze on me. "I can't let you go," he repeats in a raspy but determined voice. "I don't know if I'll be able to see you again if I do."

Silly.... I chuckle out loud and reach for his shoulders, pressing my lips on his.

In my own impression, I always use a smile to hide everything. I always keep my distance from others. I never believe. I never get intimate. I never depend. I never shed tears. There's always only me facing the world on my own. I would doubt the meaning of my life whenever loneliness slowly ate away at me. All that's left after the extravagance is fatigue and exhaustion.

Murong Yu....

He's so gentle. He's so caring. His words always tug on even the toughest of my heartstrings. Perhaps after I leave him, I'll only be able to reminisce in my dreams on the darkest of nights about this warmth that I once had.

That's right. We have no future.

None.

Smiling, I open my eyes to see the stars twinkling against the midnight skies extra brightly tonight. Their sparkles seem to lament the immeasurable, yet unalterable fate of men.

In this world, there's only him and there's only me.

So please, let me be greedy for just now. Let me hang onto this transient warmth. Let me give free reins to my feelings just this once. Let me remember his warmth and his kiss, let this moment be the most longing one of my life, and let him be engraved in my heart, for this life and all the ones to come and never fade away.



Hot steam meanders in the air, floating idly.

Bathed in warm spring water, I feel all relaxed and even a bit sleepy. I'm resting on Murong Yu's chest while he on the side of the spring, both of us with our lower halves still in the water. I don't know when he had found this spring and had just followed him in without a thought. The spring has washed away the alcohol buzz and has brought forth lust.

On his tall nose bridge is a dab of moonlight. His nostrils are moving rapidly as he breathes hard. He pushes me down. Our clothes have long disappeared and our naked bodies are skin against skin, ear against ear. We gently caress and grind against each other. I pant as I look into his dark eyes that now seem to hold two balls of flame, and read the desires that lie within.

Any man would understand them.

I can't help quivering from the lightest of his touches. He's kissing my lips while his hands wander all over my body, expertly teasing me. His palms are scorching like the spring water, pushing me high into the clouds. Shakily, I try to keep my moans in.

I let my eyes close halfway as I pant quietly in between his passionate kisses. His tongue squeezes into my mouth, sweeping over every little place. He nibbles and sucks on the tip of my tongue and a violent shudder runs through me. I'm so hot and limp that I can't do anything but let him hold me tighter.

He wraps me close in his arms and caresses me carefully, gently and longingly, as though I were a treasure.

Slowly, I return his kisses and intertwine our tongues, sweltering heat hitting my face. When he finally lets go of my lips, he skims past my neck and latches onto my earlobe, sucking and gnawing on it.

"Ahhh. Mhnn," I moan quietly and hook my arms around his neck to get closer to him.

The hot, hazy fog hangs in the air. Lust flows through me along with the spring water.

Murong Yu's eyes have gone misty with desire. Slowly, he releases my earlobe and plants light kisses down my neck. The hot puffs of air that hit me numb me and make me pant for air.

His hands trail down along my spine and massage my waist. The current is strong, making the water ripple along with his hands as they move down to my private part.

"Ah, don't touch that."

"Then what should I be touching?" He smirks and kisses me again. "Xin, I've missed that place of yours for so long."

I feel my cheeks burning up right away and a strange feeling surrounding me like the water around me. With no choice, I hang onto his shoulders and move with him.

Just how shameless is this guy?

But then again, I can't help but feel this sweetness in my heart even though I know what I'm doing now is shameful.

Do I like him?

Perhaps.

All I do know is that I don't have to hide myself as much when I'm with him. I can just be myself.

I look up at him and brush over his chest, neck and jaw, pressing and caressing. Murong Yu's eyes close into a slit and he starts breathing even harder.

"Didn't think my dear Xin could be such a tease."

I smile without answering and plant a ghost of a kiss on his collarbone as a piece of white jade swings back and forth before my eyes.

I feel like my bones have already dissolved into the steamy, silky water. Limply, I hook my legs around his waist. Waves of lust and fire brew within me. I can't stand it anymore so I moan and bite his earlobe. "Stop teasing me."

"So impatient." He gazes into my eyes. "Your body knows me, Xin. Mmm, look at this guy. He's already this hard." He says as he takes hold of my erect member, rubbing, pressing, teasing, and stroking in just the right way.

We're so close to each other that I can easily feel his manhood rubbing in that tight crevice of mine, driving me crazy.

"Murong Yu," I can't stop myself from cursing. "Are you gonna fucking do it or not? Geez."

I can't clearly see his face through the swirling steam but I feel the proximity of his sweltering breath.

"Xin," he chortles by my ear. "I was only holding back 'cause I didn't think you were ready. I'm gonna go in if you want, just don't come crying for mercy later."

I glare at him and counter. "Ain't scared of you. C'mon, man up and gimme your best shot."

"Don't say I didn't tell you so!" His breathing hitches and his expression becomes tense with desire. He thrusts forward and I feel his heat push into me along with the warm current. I shakily try to retreat but he has a firm grip on me. He pulls me down and starts ramming into me.

The water splashes echo accentuating our intense friction.

"You're so tight, Xin."

"Shut the fuck up, you bastard! Ah! Not so hard! Uhn...uhn...too deep."

"Stop talking and lemme love you...uhn."

"A-aaah! Ahh...."

"It's here, isn't it?"

I cling onto his neck. He pants as he speeds up. I can't stop my moans and I shakily call out his name, fingers tangling with him.

His manhood is ravaging my insides and lights a spark somewhere along the way. Pleasure rushes through my body while I bounce up and down with his movements as though I'm riding a wave. My body seems to have melted in the water and drowned in ecstasy.

I don't know what time it is when I wake up again from the intoxication. I'm sore and tender as if I've been washed out to sea. I unwrap his arm from around me and step into the spring. I cup some water and splash it on my face.

Last time, it had felt as though I was dreaming because of the drugs and I hadn't felt much pain. This time, I clearly felt the striking pain. The pain was as evident as the all-consuming pleasure that proceeded. I don't think I've ever felt so close to him. It was as if we became one. He drove into my body and filled me. I guess I had been waiting for that moment, too, the moment when we finally close all distance between us. Hesitantly, I look back at the shore.

He's in deep slumber right over there. The moon is shining on one side of his sharp, handsome face, his arched eyebrows, his tall and straight nose and his tightly clipped lips. His cheeks are a bit pink from last night's affairs.

A warm feeling start to exude in my heart but I force it back.

I smile bitterly and feel something get stuck in my throat, to the point that I can't speak.

I turn my back towards him and clutch my chest. Something gently slices at my heart. It's not sharp enough so all I feel is a dull, throbbing pain.

Let everything end when the morning sun rises.

And tomorrow, we shall be in separate corners of this world.

When I cup more water to wash myself, I notice the blue and purple marks on my chest and collarbone. They seem to speak of the passions that occurred last night.

I hear splashes and the next moment I see arms reaching around me from behind. Surprised, I whip around, only to see that it's Murong Yu.

He breathes in my ear, "Showing me such a luring scene right when I wake up, Xin, you're seducing me.

I watch him. I gaze at him, at his brows and eyes, at his lips—I must etch everything about him into my heart.

He tilts his head to nuzzle my ears. He makes a humming sound as though he's suppressing a laugh. "Let's do it again, Xin, right here in the water."

He seals my lips with his without waiting for my reply and reaches down with his hands in one fluid motion. Instantly, I feel a fire being lit in my abdomen and leaping up to my chest. He sucks on my earlobe while his hands keep working hard. I can feel his member getting hard, too, and sticking right up against me.

I'm too relaxed after being in the hot water for so long I couldn't possibly withstand this teasing.

"Murong-."

"Shhh, no talking."

I get whirled into a pool of desire by him once again before I could even get my words out.



Daybreak.

Darkness is still looming by the west side of the sky while light has begun to shine through the east side.

I get dressed and tie back my hair before standing up. I walk towards a horse tied down to a tree. It's a very beautiful horse: sleek, powerful build and long, slender legs with a flowing mane like snow. He gives a joyous neigh as I untie him with a sigh.

I look back to see Murong Yu's dark, gloomy expression. He remains silent, simply staring me down, a sharp glint flying across his eyes. We are wordless for now.

"You've made up your mind?"

"Yes, I have."

He speaks in a suppressed voice, but I can hear the lurking anger. "Then what was last night supposed to be?"

I push away my wavering emotions and say with the flattest voice I can manage. "I'm not gonna deny anything that happened last night, but let's just pretend it was a dream. Even the best of dreams comes to an end, and now...is the time we wake up."

He shakes and takes a few steps back, his eyes screaming bewilderment, but he speaks again with his teeth clenched. "You...you're still gonna stick with your decision—you're still gonna leave?!"

Then his face contorts in pain and he continues lowly, "Why must you turn me down? Do you not feel anything for.... None at all?"

I take a deep breath and turn away. The sky to the east is turning clear.

"Don't run away. We need to clear this up today!" He strides over and grabs my wrist. I meet his burning gaze without hiding and spot the pain within.

"I've tried to repress my feelings but it's no use. Before I knew it, looking at you would make my heart burn. I couldn't get it to go out no matter what I did. I just want to be with you. Believe me. This isn't just a one-time thing. I'm serious. Together, we could be the happiest people in the world."

Speechless, I smile at him while all my thoughts in my mind approach and get frozen behind my lips. This person and his embrace—that warm embrace—are the things I'm going to treasure for a lifetime.

Murong Yu, you don't understand. I can't give you anything and likewise, I can't promise you anything.

Slowly, I place my hand on his shoulder, my heart seeming to tremble.

"Murong Yu, you know how I am. I can't make any of the promises you want."

He's only a few inches away. After a silence, he reaches out towards me and snatches away the reins. "Don't you even think about leaving!"

I regard his eyes and the rage rolling within and a few painful tremors run through me. I drop my gaze and smile, suppressing the discomfort and my downcast heart. "What am I supposed to do if you won't let me go?"

"I said I'll protect you!"

I snap back up and glare at him. "And I'll live my life under your protection? Don't forget, I'm a man too!"

He holds my gaze, the rage in his having died down slightly. "Then what am I supposed to do?"

I stay quiet, not wanting to argue with him anymore. I pull my hand away and start stepping forward, but he tugs on me hard and pushes me down to the ground, pressing his body on mine shortly after.

"Get off! Let me up!"

"Take back what you said!"

I clench my teeth and start fighting with everything I've got—fists, knees, elbows—just so he can let go of me. The two of us tumble around on the grass like two beasts in battle. One of my attempts to knee him succeeds and hits him in the lower abdomen. He arches his back in pain but quickly chops at my waist with his right hand. I bear with the stinging pain, swallowing my moans, and slap him across the face.

He dodges and catches my wrist, ripping it aside before putting all his weight on me. I gulp for air and he moves a bit of weight away as he glares at me with icy eyes. His face is a myriad of expressions while the blood vessels on his forehead are bursting out. I just keep panting without speaking or making another move, and glare right back at him.

Our eyes lock and our lips are mere inches away. Our breaths entangle in the air, dangerously and suggestively.

“Take! Back! What! You! Said!” He roars.

“Let! Me! Go!” I yell back at him.

After keeping eye contact, I rip my gaze away so as to not see those pleading eyes anymore.

“If I don’t leave today, Murong Yu, I’ll still do it tomorrow. You can’t stop me!”

I feel his tense form loosening and his breathing becoming sporadic. I turn my head slightly and peer at him. He’s watching me without a word, chest moving up and down as he breathes. His lips are pursed and flames of anger seem to dance in his eyes.

Silent like the night. Silent like death.

He leans in and mutters in my ear. “Believe me, Xin. Just believe me.”

I look down and when I’ve finally gathered enough courage, I let these words slip out. “Just forget about me, Murong Yu.”

He stares at me, thoroughly taken back.

“Our beginning itself was because of an accident. Let’s just let go now that we’re at the end. I’ve said so many times, we’re not the same kinda people. There’s no future for us. What’s happened is the past so let’s forget about it now. From now on, you go on being a prince and I a freeman. Our paths will diverge, never to cross again.”

“Shut up!” He yells.

He pinches my chin and forces me to look. His eyes are too bright. In them lie the morning rays and my reflection. I’m afraid he’s also the only thing reflecting in my eyes right now.

“Do you really not care? Do you really think my feelings for you are all some crazy mistake?” His eyes are no longer full of determination as they usually are, instead they are filled with melancholy.

Everything in the world goes quiet. Quietly, quietly, no one makes a sound.

I’m looking at him while he’s looking at me. Our eyes seem to connect but the words and feelings aren’t able to make it across.

He suddenly lets go of my chin and gets up, taking a few steps back. I can’t decipher his expression right now. “I’ve known. You’ve wanted to leave for a long, long time.”

The morning light hits his face, making it ghastly pale. The light that reaches his dark eyes reveals sorrow and pain.

I crawl back up and brush off the dirt on my clothes.

“Go.” He passes me the reins and closes my palm. I look up at his bitter expression. “You wanna live like the wind and I know you’re not that obedient. You’d never just stay by my side like

that. And I'm your enemy no matter how you look at it. We might've reached intimacy...and I could make you stay but your heart would be gone."

I whip around. I can't bear to look at him anymore.

The next moment I feel his embrace and warmth. He gently touches my forehead, my nose, my cheeks and my neck, lightly and slowly. Time seems to have stopped and stay still in this moment.

"This is the jade my mother left me. It's been consecrated and it'll keep you safe. I'm giving it to you now...so you don't forget. It might've been a fleeting affinity but it still counts for something."

He takes the jade off and puts it on for me, tucking it under my collar. He then places his lips on mine very lightly. I feel something wet linger by my lips, not entering very far, and it brings an overwhelming coldness mixed with slivers and shreds of despair. The intense passion seems to be able to disintegrate all rational thought. I'm not sure who bit whose lip. I only taste sweet iron across the tip of my tongue and in my mouth.

"Tell me...where are you going?"

"I...don't know."

I'm definitely uncertain about my future as well, but I do know one thing and that is to get away from society and escape. I'll leave this place, leave him, never going back to Great Rui to let those people look down on me, and I won't have to stay here under an awkward title. I'm going to roam this world and live life how I want to live it and truly be myself.

He grabs my hand tightly. "This is my pass. Head southwest from here. You'll have an easier time."

"Thank you."

"You know what? I'll have my ways of finding you no matter where you go."

He places his hand on my face and lingers at my lips before slowly kissing me. "People say that people with thin lips are thin on love⁵⁵ too. I guess they were right after all."

"I'm not. I just can't promise you anything."

On his face is a gentle smile, but in his eyes are tiny, little tears. I smile as I give a big nod. I can't speak. I'm enduring and restraining myself all so that I don't falter even for a bit during this farewell.

He lets go of me. I step back, leap on the horse and spur it forward without a second of hesitation, leaving a cloud of sand swirling behind me.

Each beat of the horse's hooves seems to hit me on my heart. The scenery to the two sides slips backwards. I catch a glimpse of his figure getting smaller and smaller from the corner of my eye until it disappears into the background.

Only then do I turn around and take a brief look.

That day, I couldn't help meeting him; today, I couldn't help leaving him.

I was teetering on the fate of death when we first met; I'm still trying to find my way now after our farewell.

The wheels of destiny keep turning. Things appear for the shortest of moments only to go down another path in the end.

He has stopped in place while I have chosen to proceed. Affinity—a fleeting affinity. Who knows? Maybe we'll meet again, or maybe we'll be forever estranged in this life.

⁵⁵ A Chinese phrase meaning the cold-hearted, unloving nature of a person.

XVII: Extra-Murong Yu

Sunshine scatters in through the carved windows, dabbing the room full of spots, but the atmosphere is oddly heavy.

I remove my gaze from the men before me and slowly turn to view the military map hanging upon the wall. Dozens of bold, red lines strike across it. The places where they mark are the general strategy plan of the Yan army: depart from our current location, push straight into the heart of the Central Plains⁵⁶, block off the critical areas to the south and north, divide into three wings when we reach South Hill Pass and cut off all possibilities of attack from enemies. The Rui capital will be stranded like a rock in the ocean and perish in no time!

I stare at that map, feeling the urge to kill from my fingertips to my heart.

I have been waiting for this day for far too long and Father has been for even longer.

My men are quiet. Yuwen Yuan's eyes are twinkling when he finally comes forth and speaks.

"Your Highness, since our objectives have been settled, may I ask when decamping will begin?"

I take a moment before replying with a question instead of answering, "Have the necessary rations been properly dealt with?"

A man steps forth and reports, "In reply to Your Highness, the rations You had requested have been delivered two days ago under General Tuo's supervision. I have properly arranged it so that we may depart anytime."

I grin. "If that is the case, let my order be known. 'One day to rest and reassemble for the entire army. Prepare all supplies, equipment and rations and depart the day after tomorrow. Delays shall not be tolerated!'"

They all bow. I drop my smile and instruct, "You all may leave and make preparations."

"Yes, Your Highness," they answer in unison and bow once more before leaving the room. Only Yuwen Yuan still remains, lips pursed and eyes focused on the military map.

I pick up a cup of tea and take a sip.

It has gone cold. All I can taste is bitterness, the fragrance completely absent.

I frown very naturally. That guy is probably slacking off again and did not get the water to a full boil. I mean, what did I expect? He just goes around all day with his eyes half-closed like he is

about to fall asleep. Always so carefree. It is like he has never even been awake. Just wait until I get my hands on him once I get rid of Yuwen Yuan....

My hand trembles and out spills a few drops of tea.

How could I have forgotten? He...is long gone....

I laugh drily in my head. I replace the teacup and glance up to meet with Yuwen Yuan's burning gaze.

He steps towards me and chuckles, "It seems Your Highness' mind was wandering just now."

I raise a brow. "General Yuwen, you appear to be quite at ease, what with our campaign in hand."

"After numerous years at the side of His Majesty, He has never shown a hint of fear, His face always calm and steady like a still lake." He quickly looks up. "Your Highness, it has always been His Majesty's wish to take Great Rui once and for all!"

I smile. "Campaign after campaign, Father still has not forgotten about the splendid lands in the south."

He suddenly drops down on one knee, hands together above his head. "At last, His Majesty's wish shall be realised by Your Highness!"

I warn in a low tone. "Be careful of your words, General. Father is still the picture of health. I am naught but his servant, overseeing this war in his place."

Yuwen Yuan lowers his head, takes out an envelope from his sleeves⁵⁷ and presents it to me with two hands. I have only caught a glimpse when my hand jerks as if stung by flames: it's Father's tiger emblem on the red wax.

"His Majesty held a private talk with me before I had left. His Majesty cares deeply for Your Highness, reminding me to ensure Your safety during battles and to escort You back to the imperial capital after we capture the Rui capital and things settle a little." His look hardens. "His Majesty also said...."

"Also said?"

"His Majesty has tacitly consented to Your Highness' marriage with the duchess. Everything will proceed accordingly once You return to the capital."

I grasp Father's private letter tightly in my hands, unknowingly wrinkling it.

"How is Father's ailment?"

He wavers before nodding. "There has not been much improvement but He is as energetic as always. His Majesty also asked for Your Highness not to worry and to look after Yourself.

"I see," I pause for a while and then let out a soft sigh. "Yuwen Yuan, you...are excused."

He leaves and I am left speechless staring at Father's handwriting on the envelope. I open it in the end. As expected, it is Father's penmanship. Strong and powerful strokes fill the entire page, covering every big and little thing I should take note of on the battlefield.

Alas, it is just as he said. I feel something warm in my chest. Father, my father...really does care about his son....

I fold the letter up after reading it. I turn my gaze to the map once more.

The pieces have fallen into place—this battle is going to be inevitable.

Once Great Yan and Great Rui clash together, it will undoubtedly be a fight to the death. No one will be able to back out.

I close my eyes. I am faced with so many emotions that I am not sure what I feel.

Han Xin, oh Han Xin. When I've destroyed your country, would you still hate me even if you're on the other side of the world? Now...have you found the life you've wanted to live yet?

His voice begins to replay by my ears, flowing like a gentle stream but cutting deep into my heart.

'I'd dreamt that I'd leave these mansions and their gates when I grow up and live life like the wind, free to do whatever I wish with nothing to hold me down. I can stop and enjoy the world when I want and when I wanna leave I won't have anything to miss.'

'Just forget about me, Murong Yu.'

'Our beginning itself was because of an accident. Let's just let go now that we're at the end. I've said so many times, we're not the same kinda people. There's no future for us. What's happened is the past so let's forget it now. From now on, you go on being a prince and I a freeman. Our paths will diverge, never to cross again.'

I quickly cover my face, burying it in my hands to hide my pain and distress.

That guy...he is gone yet he still has the ability to agonize me.

Han Xin, goddamn you. If I'd known it'd end up like this, I'd rather we never meet...and I'd definitely not like you.

He was lying with his hands behind his head on a thick pile of grass that night, gazing up at the sky. The moon was bright and shone on his clear, handsome complexion, his black eyes that had within it too many settled thoughts and his lazy smile with which I was oh-so-familiar.

He said he wanted to live like the wind—'live like the wind'? Are these his true feelings?

He is always so lazy, half-asleep and half-awake. He keeps others at a distance with an indifferent smile, treating everyone politely, and faces the world all by himself. Always so carefree, always so lonely.

I like him. I do. I do not know why I would like him. I do not know why I would like a man either. All I do know for sure, out of all the chaotic feelings, is that I like him. I have never been an indecisive person. If I am the one to fall first then I will take the first step.

He was looking but he did not see. He carried on smiling half-heartedly, distancing himself. I kissed him, kissed him by force, when I finally could not take it anymore. Our tongues tangled and our breaths merged. I pushed open his teeth and swept across every inch of his mouth, not giving him the slightest chance to leave.

In that instant, I actually felt my body heating up. I wanted him. I wanted to make him mine. I wanted to make sure he never distanced himself from me again. It is not that I did not have concubines—it is not that I had never had a woman—but for some reason my cheeks would flush. For some reason, my heart would beat.

Being a son of the royal family, I have understood long ago that we must not have mercy. Under Father's ever-so-strict instruction, I have never been merciful. I also know there are two types of people in this world: useful and useless, or beneficial and detrimental. Father had bestowed upon me a concubine at age fifteen and I killed her with one strike without a second thought when I had discovered she had been plotting against me.

He did not have much luck, it seems. He kept getting hurt, never leaving Death's sight. And that one time he got injured to save me, I had felt fear from the deepest corners of my heart. I did not want to lose him, not one bit.

Perhaps, that is what it means to truly like someone, or perhaps that is love.

He does not like people talking about his appearance but he does not understand just how outstanding his appearance is for a man. He has a fresh, handsome face. His dark eyes are clear but also cool. His brows dance upwards at a slight angle and his lips are constantly clipped, forming a ghost of a smile.

His smiles were the most beautiful thing. His eyes would close a little and then his brows would arch. The corners of his lips would curve up, the lips bound tight against each other into a pretty curve. Joy would exude freely from those thin lips of his and his eyes would also glimmer.

He was holding the bowl of soup, eyes lidded in relaxation and enjoyment. Little did he know just how tempting he looked. Those star-like eyes were barely peeking out and his cheeks were a bit pink. Seeing that, it was as though my body was lit on fire. Every part of me was screaming out: I want him. I want him.

I only discovered afterwards that there had been aphrodisiacs in the soup, but he had long ago become a more potent substance than aphrodisiacs to me.

I was very much in my right mind the first time we did it. By the time I finally got him to lie down, I discovered that I had become breathless. I ducked down and caught his lips in a rough kiss. His lips turned bright red as if I had made my mark. I pulled on his shirt and it came apart easily, revealing his ivory-white skin. I felt my breathing quickening that instant as I reached for it with shaky hands. His skin felt wonderful, very elastic almost to the point my hands would get stuck to them. It was not as soft and smooth like a woman's but much more attractive.

He still attempted to resist, not allowing me to draw near and trying to break away from me. I began tearing at his lips in frustration and caressing, sucking and teasing—everything I could. His pants began to hasten. His body flushed a light pink colour and even his eyes became coated over with mist.

I admit. I really wanted to see his clear eyes become filled with lust because of me. I really wanted to see him spread himself open for me, to let himself go beneath me. I wanted his very being to be mine, never to leave again.

What an ecstatic night it was. He tried to hold in his moans but he would cry out seductively when he climaxed and wrap himself around me, holding me close while calling my name in breathy pants.

I felt like I truly had someone—someone I loved.

He fell asleep after the lovemaking. The corners of his eyes were still moist with tears. I dipped down and kissed at them. I did not want to let him go. I wanted it to last for the rest of my life.

However, I did not know why he was constantly so wistful. He would sit there all by himself during sunset with his eyes drooping low as though he was reminiscing his past. His lashes would flutter under the golden evening sun, appearing brilliant but at the same time all the more forlorn.

He had a nightmare on that one cold autumn night. He was crying and screaming and kept thrashing around. I took him into my arms and patted his back. Only then did he begin to wake up and mutter in my ears, telling me to hold him tight. I got to see for the first time on that long, dark night his pains and suffering. He grew up an orphan under someone's roof, never knowing if he would live to see the next day. Every step that he had taken seemed so arduous. Unknowingly, he had distanced himself from everyone after being hurt over and over again to the point he had become reluctant to believe in love.

He placed his face against my chest and embraced me without looking up and finally burst into tears in my arms, quietly and restrained. I hugged him tight and my heart twinged along with his continual quivering.

He and I, we are the same on the inside. The only difference is that I put on an unfeeling mask while he chooses to be indifferent. Actually, we do have one thing in common, at least, and that is the fact that we are both lonely and we understand that about each other. That alone is enough.

Perhaps we could have provided warmth for each other if we were together.

He was slightly shocked and looked at me without a word when I had finally said the words 'I like you' after all our quarrels and silent treatments. He never gave me a straightforward reply but he kissed me of his own accord for the first time.

He is too indifferent. So indifferent that he did not even bother to think about whether he felt the same way or not.

I let out a long sigh. My hands snake up to my neck. There is nothing there now. The jade pendant that Mother had left me before passing away is hanging around his neck now and has left me along with him.

In my memories, Mother was a woman with a scholarly air, as beautiful as a light-toned shan shui⁵⁸ painting created by a master. I had sometimes thought that it was precisely this unsurpassable air that made Father fall in love with her at first sight despite having so many beauties around him, to the point he still has her on his mind even until this day. I do not know what Father was to Mother, or whether she still detested him before passing away.

Mother was not used to life in Yan and was constantly ill. She never complained or mourned, however, and always kept herself neat and kempt, never showing any sorrow or weakness. One winter, her health became worsened by a cold, and she passed away before the green plums⁵⁹ that Father had especially ordered to be delivered from the south arrived.

Before passing away, she called me to her bedside, removed the white nephrite pendant from her neck and put it around mine.

‘After I leave, from that moment onwards, my son, you must remember to never remove this pendant.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it was taken to a temple by your grandfather and specially consecrated. It will keep you safe. But if you find someone you like, you may gift it to her.’

‘But why, mom?’

Mother patted me on the head. Her eyes were filled with warmth and tenderness. ‘Why, silly, jade is a token of love.’

I close my eyes and make every effort to smile but my lips will not budge.

I believe Father adored Mother. I also believe Mother had loved Father in the end. But no matter what, everything was sundered by time and it all evanesced.

Then what about me and him?

Would I be able to find him in the sea of people when I have ascended the throne and have ownership of this land? Even if I do find him, who is to say time would not have changed everything between us? Would it all have already withered away and become distant memories?

There can be no guarantees for the future. Time has the power to change anything. Perhaps that also includes our love.

I squeeze the letter in my right hand as my heart begins to ache.

After years of overcoming hardships and obstacles and putting my life on the lines battle after battle, I have longed for someone to be there, for someone to understand me, for us to support each other with all our heart and share our feelings.

Yet the person I have chosen ended up leaving me.

The sadness hits me like a blow to the chest. The pain that I have been suppressing for so long makes it impossible for me to speak. I cannot even breathe. I taste bitterness in my mouth while suffocating.

‘Let me go, Murong Yu!’

‘If I don’t leave today, Murong Yu, I’ll still do it tomorrow. You can’t stop me!’

To let him or not. In the end, I made my choice. I do not know whether or not I was right. I do not know. I simply do not.

It was my own choice whether right or wrong. Just like how Father forced Mother to be his concubine—it was his own choice. I do not know if Father had any regrets when Mother hated him. I only know it was my own choice and I would have to face the consequences myself, regardless there being regrets or no regrets.

I cannot discard my responsibilities. I cannot abandon my longing for the throne, nor can I ignore the desires to conquer and rule. By the time I have crushed Great Rui with my hands, by the time I finally find him amidst the crowds of people, would he have forgotten me? Would he hate me? Or would he pretend to not know me?

He says he wants to live like the wind when he himself is the wind.

Wind has no care or restraints, never stopping for anyone, even if the small ripples prove of an existence long ago. It is not willing to stop, not even for the most stunning of sights.

Is he afraid that once he lingers he will get blocked by the mountains or kept behind by the clouds?

I really want to know if he ever liked me, if he ever loved me.

Perhaps our beginning itself was because of an accident as he had said, and I should just let go now that it has come to an end. Forget each other, forever....

How fortunate would it be if I could actually forget that easily?

I only realized this after he had left. I am afraid I have fallen hard for him, or should I say I am crazy in love with him? If not, how would it be this torturous? Every night I close my eyes, I dream of him but none of the dreams are good. Either he is in danger somewhere out there in the war, or he becomes gravely injured and does not get treated properly, or he returns to his country only to be tried for treason. It always ends with me waking up soaked in sweat in the middle of the night, only this time there is none of the tea that he makes to calm me down.

I miss him so much. Every one of his smiles. His arched brows and devious smirks. His bickering. His seductive figure when he is aroused. His soft, quiet moans. Him... I miss everything about him.

My eyes finally burn with moisture.

This is my first time shedding tears since Mother passed away. A small teardrop slowly slides down my cheek and forms a crystalline drop upon my desk. I drag my cape across and it disappears without a trace as if it had never existed.

Han Xin, you asshole. Where the hell are you?

Han Xin, am I ever gonna see you again?

Han Xin, you get back here this instant!

Han Xin....

⁵⁶ Area around the lower reaches of the Yellow River, or the eastern portion of the North China Plains, and corresponds roughly to present day provinces, Henan, Hebei, Shanxi and Shandong. This is often called the cradle of Chinese civilization. Most Han-ethnic dynasties have established their empire with their capital in the Central Plains, so the term has become an alternative name for the Han people and whatever states occupied it at the time.

⁵⁷ Sleeves contained compartments to store things, much like pockets.

⁵⁸ A major branch of Chinese painting, literally meaning 'mountain-water' and usually depicts natural landscapes.

⁵⁹ This is a direct translation as there is no such word for this fruit in English. The scientific name is *Vatica mangachapoi*. This fruit is only found in subtropical or tropical places.

XVIII: The Capital

Black. Pitch black.

I open my eyes wide in the darkness only to find that I can't see a thing. I can only hear what seems to be the sound of horse hooves hitting the ground. There's constant rocking, too. I try to shout out in a panic only to find a piece of cloth stuffed in my mouth, preventing any sound from escaping.

I squeeze my eyes shut then open them again. It's still just as dark.

What the hell is this?

I move my neck a little and it immediately starts stinging painfully. I yelp and feel a dull pain on my chest.

Right. That's right. My neck.... I close my eyes and recall in the rocking darkness what had happened after leaving Murong Yu.

With his pass in hand, I ran into several patrols but no real harm came. Later, around noon, I arrived at the edge of the Yan camp. I had wanted to leave right then but my horse needed water—just as much as I did—so I located a water source. I hopped off the horse and cupped some water in my hands but before it reached my lips, from the corner of my eye, I caught several shadows amidst the trees.

I panicked and turned to escape on my horse but one of the shadows had already entered my vision. His steel eyes were glaring behind his mask. He dug into my shoulders and just as I tried to reach over, he chopped at my neck with his other hand. As the horse whinnied in alarm, my raised arm dropped down to my side without hitting its target and darkness fell upon me. The last thing I remember is my shoulders being tightly constrained, not able to budge an inch.

A shudder runs through me and the acute pain from my neck pulls me back to the present. My heart is pounding furiously. *Bah-boom. Bah-boom.* It echoes in the lightless, narrow space. It feels like my heart is going to burst out of my ribcage.

I try to see my surroundings but to my dismay, I'm limp and only manage to wiggle my fingers a little.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. I get myself to calm down with a few repetitions.

I lift myself up a bit and cautiously reach out with my hands. My palms slide across something cold and hard. I start to get an idea after some more exploration.

Clop-clop-clop. It's the sound of a galloping horse. There are also the thuds of wood boards against each other. I give a weak nod. This is probably a moving carriage and I seem to be in a long, narrow box on the carriage.

A long box, huh. There's only one thing that fits that wouldn't raise any suspicion.

I quickly bite down on my lips to stop my discomfort.

Who would attack me? And where are they taking me?

I don't recall having any enemies and can't think of anyone who might have such a large grudge against me. I feel chills and cold sweat down my back.

A million notions race through my mind. I urge myself to keep calm again and stay silent in the dark, while overwhelming fear and loneliness attack me.

I don't know where I am. I don't know who's around me. I don't even know where I'm heading to.

Easy, Han Xin. You need to calm down.

It's not the first time you've encountered this. You know how to face everything yourself.

I hear a sharp whistle and the carriage stops unexpectedly. *Thud.* Caught off guard, I bump my shoulder against the wooden board. I rub my shoulder while gritting my teeth. I think I hear talking and some faint footsteps.

"I heard something hit the board. Is it gonna be alright?" a stranger asks. Someone else answers momentarily, "Don't worry. We're almost there. It'll be fine."

With a crisp crack of a whip, the carriage starts moving once again.

Whether I'm heading for the den of ferocious beasts or a monstrous cliff or even—knock on wood—the end of the road, I can only stay as I am and bide my time.

With my mind in a daze and the fatigue, thirst and hunger setting in, I lose consciousness again and again only to be woken up by the bumpy ride every time.

The creaking of the wheels seems to loop on forever and ever. I strain my ears to identify my surroundings. There seems to be the sound of water, and conversation, and a market and even kids playing.... My vision fades out and my body gets colder and colder.

Am I going to make it out of this one?

I'm not sure how much time has passed when I suddenly hear a loud crack by my ears and light starts stinging my eyes. I spot a blurry figure swaying in front of me and it appears I'm being carried out. My bones are so sore they could split. I lean on the person and let myself fall over.

I sleep deeply. I don't know what's going on but it feels like I've returned to a familiar place, even the smell bringing back memories.

There are faces in my dream. There are someone dressed in Yan armour and the echoes of a girl's tinkling laughter.



I sleep for a long, long time, perhaps an eternity.

“It’s time to wake up.” Someone touches my forehead in my sleep. I snap open my eyes in alarm.

What I see before me are fancy drapes. I slowly sit up after a deep breath. There’s a middle-aged woman smiling kindly beside me. I look around warily and find everything to be familiar, but my head is throbbing and I can’t remember.

She presses her lips together. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten about this lil’ ol’ lady after your little fieldtrip to the frontiers.”

I rub my eyes and only then does my vision clear up. I see a proper-looking woman dressed in blue, hair done up in a plain style. It’s none other than....

“Maid Xiu.” I squint at her in slight disbelief. She nods, still smiling, and sits down on the edge of the bed. Quickly, I look around at the layout of the room. “And this couldn’t possibly....”

“This is the Minister’s Mansion. Young Master, surely you haven’t forgotten?” She brings over a bowl of steamy hot congee while talking. “Get yourself warmed up first. Master Han may be coming by later.”

Uncle?

Hesitantly, I take the bowl. I still can’t make heads or tails of this. Maid Xiu is a servant of my great-aunt, the empress dowager—why is she here? Also, what the hell is going on here? From her words, it seems like Uncle’s people brought me back, which I don’t believe. I don’t believe that inhospitable uncle of mine would risk rescuing me from the Yan military base. Or maybe it’s because he thinks I’ve sold the country out and made such a huge effort to bring me back to punish me?

I can almost feel the cold sweat breaking. There’s always a reason behind everything Uncle does. He definitely would not be nice to me purely on the basis of our relation as uncle and nephew.

“Maid Xiu, I...have something to ask you.” After several attempts, I finally pull a broad smile on my rigid face. She sits down again, looking at me with a puzzled expression. I cough and ask quietly, “Do you know what’s been goin’ on the past few days?”

She stays quiet for a while, her face so obviously downcast. She replies flatly, “We are in the middle of a war. What could possibly happen?”

“Then...why’m I...?”

I want to ask why I am back in the capital but she interrupts, “Save it for later. Plus, what’s so bad about making it back in one piece?” She pauses. “I’m sure Miss Han’s soul would not be able to rest peacefully if anything happened to you.”

My eyes go wide and the bowl shakes uncontrollably in my hands. The ‘Miss Han’ whom Maid Xiu is talking about is my mother, Uncle’s only blood sister and the niece whom the empress dowager had greatly adored.

When it comes to my mother, all I can manage to do is sigh depressingly. I zone out looking at the bowl of congee. Out from it wafts the scent of grains, stimulating my empty stomach. Maid Xiu dabs at her tears and urges me to eat.

Ah, screw it. Filling up my stomach is of utmost importance right now.



The next day, I get called by Uncle to the back hall. He has just come back from the morning court meeting, with fatigue written all over his face and black circles under his eyes. His bright red court attire forms a glaring contrast with the few white hairs on his head.

Uncle’s name is Han Jun. He is the empress dowager’s nephew but he’s only seven or eight years younger than her. As a high-ranking official who has served two emperors, he is currently the Minister of Personnel and also holds the title of Archduke Jing⁶⁰, continuously working with the empress dowager to exert control over the court. The Han clan has been the dominant clan of the affluent since my great-grandfather’s time and now, Uncle’s generation has been in constant conflict with Heng Ziyu, the Protector of the Seas, who holds the military power.

A twinkle flashes across his eyes when he sees me but vanishes in an instant.

“Morning.” He doesn’t spare me many words.

Uncle has always been strict with me so I wouldn’t say we’re close. I give a nervous nod as reply. A maid takes off his outer robe and he sits down, stroking his beard. He doesn’t look at me either and orders flatly. “Stay in the mansion and behave. Don’t go horsing around with those swine you call friends.”

It sounds no different from any other day when he is reprimanding me to not hang out on the streets as if I hadn’t just come back from the war and were still that same playful good-for-nothing.

Oh, come on, Uncle. You can keep quiet about kidnapping me, but you shouldn’t treat me like how you usually do. No matter what, I just got back from a war in one piece. Shouldn’t you at least give me a pat on the back?

Sadly, I get blatantly ignored by Uncle. With a wave of his hand, the houseboy drags me out in the blink of an eye.

The whistling autumn wind blows and yellow leaves fall—the Minister’s Mansion is a sight to behold. Despite the recent bloody massacre, the prosperity and wealth of the capital stay constant. I sigh as I stroll through the garden with nothing better to do.

This is so boring. Why doesn’t he just kill me and get it over with instead of not letting me out?

I think about my ‘swine’ friends with my chin propped up by my hand. I wonder how they’re doing after I’ve been gone for so long.

You won’t let me go out but these legs only listen to me, I snicker.



Arabian Nights⁶¹ is the most famous restaurant in the capital. Rich music plays, and dice and wine cups are scattered everywhere during the meal. Loud and boisterous, the place is always packed with patrons. Even from the private rooms on the second floor, I can still hear the waiters greeting and serving downstairs.

With a table full of delicious cuisine and exquisite wine before me, I must say I’m satisfied.

“So how has war been for you, Han Xin?” A fresh-faced, polite looking man pours for me.

I furrow my brows and shoot him a dirty look. “What do you mean ‘how has war been’? What would you people know about war when you’re living it up in the capital?”

The speaker, Song Ruoming, pulls an amused smile. “Hah. Look at Mr. Warrior here, all serious business now.”

“I know, right?” A more unreserved man on my right nods while drinking. “Ruoming, now that ya mention it, Han Xin kinda has a stick up his ass like his uncle now.”

“Ouch, Pei Yuan. You out of all people.”

The Rui Dynasty largely focuses on scholarship and the Song family has had a strong footing in the court through the imperial examination⁶² process. Many of them are lettered scholars with a poised air. Song Ruoming, the youngest son of the Song family, holds the position of Assistant Imperial Auditor⁶³ and Judicial Reviewer⁶⁴, and is a person who can’t seem to keep his nose out of things. The Pei family, on the other hand, has a martial background, and has protected the royal family for generations. Pei Yuan holds the title of Lieutenant General in the Golden Guardian. The three of us are about the same age and share similar interests and aspirations.

“Whatever. Not gonna waste my breath arguing. Just go try it for yourself,” I dare him before getting up. There are only the three of us in the room so it’s not too crowded. I turn to the windowsill, leaning against it with my wine in hand, and push open the windows.

The crimson sun is already hanging low in the west along with the many bulbous clouds. Arabian Nights is situated on one of the busiest streets in the city and the people are packed like sardines. The road side lights have already been lit so it’s as bright as day. The festive lanterns have only recently been put up and the crowd is swept up by the mood. The capital of a country never sleeps. Countless people surge in from the dark towards the bright, splendid and enticing illuminations like moths to a fire, rushing to indulge in this momentary extravagance.

As I sip my wine, bloody images of the battlefield flash across my vision instead: broken spears, severed body parts, horses stomping over broken bones and painting the ground red with blood, and corpses everywhere. Song Ruoming paces towards me and looks down at the street, too.

“We won’t be able to see this prosperity anymore if the capital falls.” He sighs.

“Well, we won’t just sit and watch.”

Pei Yuan laughs half-heartedly. “‘Sit and watch.’ Well said.” There’s a long pause before he continues. “Han Xin, you wouldn’t know ‘cause you just got back but shit’s been going down in the court these days. No one knows how it’s gonna turn out.”

I whip my head back and Song Ruoming explains casually. “Minister Xie suggested a southward relocation⁶⁵ and many of the high-ranking officials agreed. There are less and less supporting the war with Yan.”

“Relocation?” Unknowingly, I grip my cup tighter. “If we do, we’d lose the people’s faith and consequently, the control over the country! Are the royal family and officials gonna run away and leave the defenseless commoners here to be tyrannized by the Yan army?”

Pei Yuan takes a deep breath. “It’s common sense but that’s not how those selfish, but powerful, officials think. It’s enough to save their own asses.”

Dismay flickers in Song Ruoming’s eyes as he recites Lao-Tzu. “The heavens lack compassion, treating all beings as dirt; the saints lack compassion, treating all commoners as dirt.”

“And what does the empress dowager have to say about this?” I ask through clenched teeth.

Song Ruoming turns back to the window and gazes at the scarlet evening glow. “The empress dowager is a woman and naturally doesn’t want to fight. She hasn’t yet made any statements but it does seem like she agrees in part with Minister Xie’s proposal.”

I turn away to the scene outside. There’s only dead silence.

“The Wang family are all scholars but are also very proud and have always advocated a fight to the death with Yan. Then ten days ago, however, the whole family suddenly gets exiled by the empress dowager for some ridiculous crime. My father felt it was unfair and said just one word of support for them and he got put on temporary suspension at home.” Song Ruoming heaves a sigh. “I’m just an assistant auditor. I can talk all I want but I can’t actually get anything done.”

I lower my head and pat his back in comfort.

Pei Yuan suddenly asks, “Ruoming, what about His Majesty? Is He just gonna let the empress dowager interfere with state affairs?”

Song Ruoming walks back to the table and pours another cup for himself. “His Majesty stays in the confines of the palace. And you know about how domineering the empress dowager is. Plus there’s Minister Han.” He glances sideways at me. “One way to put it is that His Majesty is just her puppet. He couldn’t do anything even if he wanted.”

I don’t know how the Han clan raised such a relentless woman. Once upon a time, she and my grandfather aided the Former Emperor Rui Mu in claiming the throne, she from the palace and he from the court, and proceeded to plant their people in the court and replace the other parties’ control. The Han clan enjoyed such prestige, power and wealth at that time that even the throne

couldn't compare. Twelve years ago, she killed the rebellion by Duke Zhao Rui and used the opportunity to lessen the power of the lords and strengthen that of the Han's. After Grandfather passed away, Uncle took over his position, the authority of the Han clan becoming higher than ever before.

I shake my head and lean on the windowsill again. There's a whole mess of feelings but it also seems like there are none.

"Relocation, huh." Pei Yuan scoffs. "We don't needa get ahead of ourselves here. It's not like our families would leave us behind if the Yan broke through the walls. We might even be the first ones outta here."

Song Ruoming squeezes through his teeth, his face slightly pale. "Even the lowest commoner has responsibilities towards his country, let alone the elites!"

Pei Yuan tosses his cup and scoffs, "What good are they? Heng Ziyu, who everyone calls a saviour, is the exact same. We all know what he's really after!"

I stay by the windows, quietly watching the pedestrians.

I'm not an elite so I wouldn't know what they're arguing for, but 'treating commoners as dirt' is definitely not something that an elite does.

"And what's my uncle's standpoint?"

Pei Yuan takes a moment before answering. "Minister Han isn't exactly thrilled 'bout relocating—he's more for fighting—but everything's uncertain right now. The civil and martial officials are both suspicious of one another, not to mention Marshal Heng hasn't been particularly enthusiastic about fighting back for some reason, so..."

"And the ones for relocation are so cooperative if they write a few more memorials⁶⁶ and the empress dowager makes up her mind then there will be no helping it."

"Who knows," I let out a deep sigh and sit back in my seat. "We're powerless to do anything but talk. It's not like we could say no if they decided to relocate to the south. If it happens, the only thing we can do is run with our tails between our legs."

Pei Yuan grinds his teeth together. "It's this submissive nature that has Great Rui looked down upon and stamped over. It's just war. I say we go all out. Even if we lose it'd be better than being laughed at."

The martial class have been oppressed for a long time and Pei Yuan has just spoken the thoughts of many of them.

Song Ruoming heaves another sigh and the conversation dies.

Seeing the time, we finish the remaining wine and leave down the stairs. Pei Yuan puts an arm on my shoulders and says, "Han Xin, since you've made it back from the war and all, you should go see Wang Shu sometime soon."

I look at him with surprise. "What?"

Song Ruoming looks back at me with a smirk. "You had left in such a hurry you didn't even say goodbye to her. She asks us about you every single time we go drinking on the yacht⁶⁷."

Pei Yuan claps me on the back and says good-naturedly. “I feel so sorry for her when I see her like that. She’s the class act that has all sorts of guys after her but she only got eyes for you out of all people. Don’t ya think you should go just ‘cause of that?”

I quickly shake my head. “I ain’t her man. I’ve never touched her.”

Pei Yuan shakes his head in disapproval and interrupts me. “Aren’t you always the gentleman? What have you got to lose?” He slaps me hard on the back. “Don’t make her feel bad. Just go when you get time to.”

I rub my back as we go our separate ways. Immediately, two houseboys start tailing me. Uncle certainly is one sly bastard. He knew I would sneak out so he made sure there would always be someone keeping track of me.

I jump on my horse and tug on the reins. The evening wind blows away the alcohol buzz and my mind clears from the chill that hits me.

No, it’s not that simple. There must be some other reason for him to keep an eye on me.

By the time I get back to the mansion, I feel a bit tipsy again so I rush through the garden to get to my room. I’m striding through the corridor when I see a figure standing in the middle of it, gazing at the courtyard bathed in moonlight, his clothes swaying in the breeze.

“Who’s there?”

The man turns around. I shake my head to clear my mind only to discover that it’s Uncle. Shit. He hates drunk people. This realization thoroughly wakes me up.

Uncle comes pacing towards me dressed in casual wear. I chuckle uncomfortably. “I got invited for a drink and I didn’t want to say no so...”

He walks past me and orders flatly. “Follow me.”

I do so blankly and sneakily peer at his expression. Once in a while, when he glances over at me, I would immediately look away and act oblivious.

Communicating with Uncle is just impossible.

Not many people are allowed to go into Uncle’s study. With big, curious eyes, I step into the two-part room separated by a pale green satiny curtain hanging from the ceiling by jade hooks. The first thing I see is a subdued ink painting of pines and bamboos, and below the painting are a pair of brown chairs and a long table. Beside them is a pair of high stands decorated by ornamental flowers. Uncle raises the curtains, signaling for me to enter, and I obey.

The moment I step in, I’m faced with a huge military map.

“This—is it the Imperial Map of the Realm?” Unknowingly, I step forward and reach out for the vast, alluring territories painted on the surface.

Uncle nods and takes a seat behind the desk, stroking his beard. “You know how to read a military map?”

I nod and reply quietly. “I picked it up when I was in the army.”

He smiles a little, saying. “It proves wise to have made you go get some life experience, or else you would know nothing but fun and games.”

I'm screaming injustice in my mind. I could have died a hundred times over out on the frontiers if I weren't hardy or lucky.

With the hazy candlelight, I can see Uncle's spotty white sideburns and the weariness written on his face, making him appear older than ever. He picks up the tea and starts in a raspy voice. "Master Liao has taught you the arts of war. I shall test you today. Study the map and I will ask you a few things."

My heart almost skips a beat but I mumble my obedience and turn to the map.

"The Yan army has arrived at South Hill Pass with numbers said to be in the two hundred thousands. If you were to lay siege, what would you do?"

I take a moment to contemplate before approaching the map and pointing at South Hill Pass. "Split into three bands, one to the north, one to the south and the stronger forces in the middle." I explain as I draw arcs to the north and south. "These two would block the critical passageways and cut off all possible reinforcements in addition to surrounding the capital."

Uncle keeps his gaze on me while his expression alters the slightest. "Continue."

"We've run South Hill Pass for many years but the overall manpower is not sufficient so it's highly likely we'll abandon it and do a full retreat back into the capital."

"How do we secure the capital?" He asks after a pause.

I press my lips as I look at him. "In front of the capital lies six hundred *li* of flat plains with nothing to aid in defense. In the arts of war, this piece of land is equivalent to an exclave. It would be pointless even if we have three hundred thousand, let alone one hundred thousand. On the other hand, the Yan army is unified and has high morale...." I peer sideways at him. He's fingering his cup, his face hidden in the candlelight's shadow, so I continue. "While we.... The civil and martial officials are untrusting of each other and uncooperative, not to mention there are people eyeing the throne. With all this in play, there's no way of knowing who will take home the chips."

Uncle suddenly opens his eyes and casts his cup aside, staring holes into me. His gaze is cold and his expression peculiar.

"Excellent." He stands up and paces towards the map, sliding his hand across it slowly without sparing me a glimpse. "Tell me. Do you think we could win if we put in everything to defend the capital?"

I jerkily back away and come into contact with the icy wall. I shake my head as cold sweat breaks out.

I have no idea.

An eerie smile spreads on his face. "You don't know? That's right. You don't know. I don't know. Even the empress dowager in Yong An⁶⁸ Palace does not know."

"Some people say it would be better to relocate to the south than fighting to the death, and use the natural barricades of the Qihe⁶⁹ River to combat the Yan." His face contorts into a weird half-smile. "Relocation this, relocation that. They almost persuaded this old man here into jumping on board."

I grab his sleeve out of pure shock. "Uncle, you wouldn't!"

He slowly turns to me with a smile I can't comprehend. "You would not stay here when everyone else has gone, would you?"

I watch as he seems to age right before my eyes. His figure is stiff and tense, shoulders slightly bent inwards and white hair swaying in the air. He turns and sits back in his seat after heaving a long, miserable sigh.

"Come." He beckons to me. I obediently follow after a moment's hesitation.

He keeps his eyes on me for a long time without talking, as if to find something on my face. I don't make a sound and let him scrutinize me. A deathly silence looms in the study.

Finally, he looks away and opens his balled up fist, pushing a dark green thing towards me. "This is yours. Don't lose it again."

I study it steadily before reaching out for it and clasping it. It's shaped like a ring, its colour a jade green like water. The relief carving depicts two intertwining panlong⁷⁰ with their jade bodies twisted, looking back at each other.

It's my old pendant. I raise an eyebrow. Why did Uncle have it?

It seems he is very tired. He has his head propped on his right hand while he waves at me with his left. Too scared to ask any more questions, I turn and leave through the curtains.

I observe the jade carefully under the moon. The jade is emerald green and reflects a faint ring of light, the two twisted panlong seeming to have come to life and are bellowing wildly.

Slipping the pendant under my collar, I suddenly feel a pang of sorrow. I stare fixedly at the distant, hazy lunar rays and let out a soft sigh.

I've recovered my pendant, but his is still with me.

Before going to sleep, I realize a very serious problem. Everyone who should be around is around and I've seen the people I used to see, but there is just one person missing who should be in the mansion.

And that person is Master Liao.

⁶⁰ 靖 (*jing4*), either means: 1) quiet; 2) to subdue or pacify; 3) to plot against; or 4) to respect. I propose the second meaning.
*hint*hint*

⁶¹ This is not a literal translation of 天方樓. The term 天(*tian1*) 方(*fang1*) (literally, sky square) is originally a term that refers to the holy city of Mecca and later has been used as a substitute for Arabia in general. I used some creativity to come up with a name fit for a restaurant, because I doubt anyone wants to eat at Sky Square Building.

⁶² In China, one must undergo an examination held by the court in order to become an official whether it is a civil or martial position.

⁶³ This position is similar to an ombudsman or the Government Accountability Office in the USA. In most dynasties, those holding this position were authorized to impeach other officials.

⁶⁴ This position consists of proposing, editing and reviewing laws.

⁶⁵ Refers to a relocation of the capital.

⁶⁶ Memorials to the throne are a formal method of communication between the emperor's subjects and the emperor.

⁶⁷ A luxury pleasure boat where courtesans similar to Japanese geisha or Korean kisaeng could be hired for performances. Basically a brothel on water. See picture below.

⁶⁸ 永(*yong3*) 安(*an1*), literally 'eternal peace.'

⁶⁹ A river flowing in present day Jiading, Shanghai.

⁷⁰ Dragon-like mythical creatures believed to govern lakes and control rainfall. See below for a similar piece.

XIX: The Dendant

The Yu River is separated into the Inner River and Outer River. The Inner River travels eastward through the capital from the west and abruptly curves around, forming the rippling, pellucid waters that is Lake Yu, the most bustling region on the Yu River. Since the ancient times, royalty and nobles have resided and literati and intellectuals have gathered near its shores. Then, wealthy businessmen began amassing and countless brothels were erected, and scores of pleasure boats float across the waters, making the area for beautiful courtesan to congregate.

Faint wisps of smoke rise from a jade censer in curls like a hairspring, hovering so lazily in the room that fanning it does not make it dissipate. The thick aroma makes me dizzy and I push the red windows open. The evening breeze brings along the lake's moisture as it blows in from outside, scattering the fragrance and also rattling the bead curtain.

Looking down from where I am, the entire river is enshrouded by a thin veil of fog. The lights from the shoreline adorning the night are reflected in the water, illuminating and adding colour to it. Glazed glass lanterns⁷¹ hang from the yachts of various sizes as they traverse the lake, rocking along the ripples, making the lake as bright as day. The limpid melodies of instruments and voices of maidens echo from the boats, scattering upon the lake's surface, appearing all the busier.

The shadows of the lively maidens get dragged into different lengths by the lanterns, some even swimming in the water. Red buildings with green doors and windows, fan dancing⁷² and song performances⁷³—the capital's Lake Yu is always this extravagant, luxurious and captivating.

I lean on the embroidered *ta* and chuckle softly at the fabulous view of the lake. I can't help but recite,

“The sound of oars and shadows of lights stretch for miles; the singing courtesans and pleasure boats frolic along the waves.”⁷⁴

“It's late. Close the windows,” says the gentle voice of a woman from behind the chiffon curtains.

I sit up straight and push them out wider. “The fragrance in your room is too thick. I can't really stand it.”

The curtains are drawn before I finish speaking and out walks a young woman. She sits down beside me, smiling coyly. "What're you talking about? You've never once said that you couldn't stand it all those times you've been here before."

The woman before me has a clear, exquisite complexion and eyes like the autumn rain, twinkling and tempting. Ornate hair pins dangle from her luxuriant, coiffed hair. Her body is shaped like an hourglass and small dimples show when she smiles, which makes her even more attractive.

I smile back at her. "I just came back from the war, Wang Shu. I'm used to the smell of blood."

Her pretty face darkens and she reaches over to my chest. "How was it? Did you get hurt?" I shake my head and lift her hand away, moving my gaze out the window. She sits closer, putting her hand on my shoulder. "You were away for so long and you never told me. I was worried for you every day."

There is a folk song sung throughout the city: 'Only at the Jade House in the capital, can you behold Madam Wang⁷⁵.'

I chuckle and hold her hand. "Really?" She puckers her lips and leans in, a ghost of her scent drifting over. I tilt my head away. "Wang Shu, I've been missing your honey malt all this time. Could you bring me some?"

She suddenly blushes and bites her lip, not saying a word as she takes a cup. I sit up, put on my jacket and take a sip of the tea that has long gone cold. Wang Shu rushes over and grabs my cup.

"Don't drink cold tea. It's autumn, you might catch a cold," she chides.

I laugh it off and take the steamy brew from her. She circles around and gets on the *ta*, hooking her bare forearms that are peeking out of her purple silk georgette sleeves around my shoulders, and gently start leaning on my back.

I glance sideways after swallowing. "Wang Shu, you've gotten a lot heavier."

She raises her brows, purses her lips and lifts a hand to hit me. "How rude! You're still so full of beans."

I dodge her cute fist and retort. "I'd know since you're lying on my back. Hurry up and get off before I get crushed to death."

She closes her eyes halfway and smiles lazily. "No way in a million years. You gotta make up for all the time you've been gone."

I laugh heartily while shaking my head. "You little rascal. Everyone sees you as the top courtesan, the most wanted of them all, but you're really this cheeky little girl."

She giggles and starts play-fighting with me. She keeps rubbing herself into me and her painted fingernails slowly sneak into my shirt, touching my skin along with the night chill.

Curious, she pulls out the red string that the jade pendant is hanging on and asks with her head lowered. "Han Xin, I don't remember you having this one."

I take a glimpse and nod while I sigh in my mind. "It was a gift."

She takes it into her hand and studies it in strange silence.

“From who?”

I put my cup down and mull over what to say.

“A... Friend.”

She lies back down on my back.

“No,” she says after a pause. “Tell me the truth. Whose daughter is she⁷⁶?”

I drop my gaze and take the pendant back. “Don’t think too much of it. It’s nothing.” I try getting up but she hugs me, not letting me move.

She bites on her bottom lip. “Don’t go.”

I distinctly feel that she is getting cold and shivering. I take her dangling hand and turn to look at her misty eyes that seem a bit grey like the sky before it rains.

I stroke her soft hand saying, “It’s not what you think. Really, it’s nothing.” I can see the tears forming but she doesn’t speak, so I pull her on my lap and comb my fingers through her flowing hair. She rests quietly on my shoulder, wordless, and sobs.

The aroma is still dispersing idly and the lucid musical notes are spreading through the night. Red candles shine from high above, casting a charming and seductive glow.

“There, there. You promised before that you’d never cry again.”

She clutches my collar and looks up with crestfallen eyes and quivering lips. I take a deep breath and look somewhere else.

Her feelings... It’s not that I’m not aware of them, but I just....

She buries her face in my chest with her arms wrapped around my neck. She breathes, “Just stay the night, just tonight...is all I ask.” Her hands slide down and her fingers pull open my collar, my jacket, my belt, finally slipping in and gently rubbing.

I clutch her hand and she regards me with melancholy eyes. “You despise me?”

I shake my head in silence. She looks steadily at me. “Do you know why so many people are seeking thrills nowadays?”

“The Yan army’s just outside our walls. Who knows what would happen tomorrow, so I guess they’re just lying to themselves.”

Wang Shu nods with teary eyes. “I don’t know what would happen to me either. Am I going to get married off as a concubine? Or maybe I’ll end up in some unknown place in this chaotic world?” She sighs depressingly. “I can’t control the future but I want to at least take the present into my own hands.”

She sniffs, her fingers clinging on to my collar. “I’ve known you for more than a year now. You’re kind to me and you protect me and I like you, too. Instead of regretting it later, why not enjoy the present?”

I wipe her tears away and whisper. “I’ve known about your feelings. But I can’t. These things should be done between lovers.”

She places my hand on her face and repeat. “Between lovers? I know you have a prestigious background, while I’m just a lady of pleasure. I could never be good enough for you. But I’m not asking for much. Just one night, just one’s enough.”

I chuckle quietly. "I'm not as good as you think."

She hooks her arms around my neck and mutters in my ears. "I'm the most beautiful courtesan in the city, but I've never let any man touch me, and tonight, I'm yours."

I feel my last shred of resistance snapping. Even if I don't want her now, I still have the natural desires of a man. In my arms lies a woman's tender body, and her body scent is sneaking into my nose. I start breathing more heavily and my body temperature is on the rise.

I whisk around and push her down on the bed, trinkets falling from her hair onto the embroidered surface. She has started to pant as well and pulls open her blouse, flashing her snowy white skin. I feel my mouth going dry and lean in to caress her face. She bites her lip and grabs my arm tightly, leaving nail marks on my skin.

My undershirt has slid down with her movements. She holds me by the neck, kissing my cheek. I plant a kiss near her ear and plant more down her fair neck. Amidst the lust, I spot out of the corner of my eye the jade pendant dangling on my neck, having slipped out from my undershirt, and refracting a pale glow. Abruptly, I push myself up, panting for air. Wang Shu is partly unrobed, her breasts peeking out, her hair spread out messily on the *ta*. Puzzled, she looks at me with flushed cheeks and misty eyes.

I shut my eyes and put my forehead down in my hand. My mind is a mess.

Wh-what the heck am I doing?

I spring off the bed, grab my clothes and push the bead curtains out of the way as I step out to the front room. Once I'm out of the back room, I feel my temperature going down with the fresh night wind pouring in through the window. Hurriedly, I get dressed and just as I'm about to leave, I hear her weeping from behind the curtains.

"So you do have someone you like after all."

I reach out for the curtains but I don't lift it up.

"I knew it the moment I saw the jade around your neck. Jade is a token of love. I guess...we just weren't meant to be."

Her short, simple words seem to stir up a storm in my heart, making it as congested as the stuffy air before a tempest.

What was that just now? Was it that I didn't want her or...because of that pendant? I turn my head away violently, not wanting to delve any deeper.

The room is filled with silence, swaying lights and shadows, and dejected agarwood.

"They say, 'the song and dance of Madam Wang is famous throughout the capital.' Han Xin, I'm originally a courtesan for the court, and will soon be called to perform in the palace⁷⁷. I'm not sure I'll be able to come back if I go, and I thought that tonight I could...but you..." Her sobs are getting louder.

I think of our nostalgic memories, all the feelings transforming into a deep sigh. "Wang Shu, I was in the wrong tonight but I have my reasons, too. I just hope you don't hate me. I *am* going to buy you your freedom."

It's already late in the night when I walk out of her pink room adorned with luxurious silks and rare fabrics. Leisurely, I descend the stairs and skip over the crowds of indulgence and pleasure, flinging aside a few delicate, luring hands, and cut through the bare shoulders and half-covered breasts.

The livelihood on the lake is showing no signs of dying down. The lights are still flashing, the wine keeps pouring and the music keeps playing.

As I stroll out of Jade House, the constellations are twinkling above me and it's as if I've gone back to that unforgettable night when the melodious notes of the *Cries of Soaring Swan Geese* twisted and turned about the unclouded night sky, only to vanish the next moment into thin air.



Life in the capital is as dull as dishwater, and as usual, no one gives a shit about me aside from my buddies.

Maid Xiu returned to the palace without telling anyone on my second day back. Uncle hasn't spoken to me much since that night and continues to be absent for most of the day. As for Master Liao, I still haven't seen a trace of him.

Ignoring the possible consequences, I asked Uncle where Master Liao was and he replied without even looking up from his book: "He asked for a two month leave. Said he was going back home to visit family."

He was obviously brushing me off. I was debating whether to ask him where exactly Master Liao had gone or not when the butler came in and bowed down to Uncle. Seeing that it wasn't something I should be meddling with, I hurried up and left the study.

Sitting in the gallery, bored to tears, I sigh for the hundredth time today.

See, I've been grounded ever since Uncle saw me coming back from Jade House that night, and there has been someone keeping an eye on me every minute of the day. If I so much as step near the mansion's front doors, the butler would pop out from nowhere and very politely ask me to go back.

Motherfucker.

I'm gonna leave this shithole once I get the chance. Go as far as I can, and go anywhere I want.

I'm going off on a rant when my shoulder gets tapped out of nowhere and I almost fall over. I take a look only to see the butler smiling very politely. He points in a direction behind himself. "The master wishes for you to accompany him to the royal palace. Please prepare accordingly."

Immediately, I break out in a cold sweat.

T-t-to the palace. To the palace?!

T-t-to see that horrible old hag?!

My god! Just lock me back in the log shed, please!



The sky is covered with clouds and a glow of crimson like flames burning bright. The sunset radiates off the dark green glazed roof tiles on Tai Qing⁷⁸ Palace, casting ever-changing rays. Agarwood is burning in the two bronze tortoise-and-crane-shaped⁷⁹ censers standing on each side of the grand hall. Thin strings of aromatic smoke float out from their mouths, making the palace seem like one in the heavens.

Casting my gaze afar, I don't see many people on the abandoned Imperial Path⁸⁰, only Golden Guardians standing on duty. I shiver as the chilly autumn breeze brushes past. Pulling my Guardian uniform tighter around me, I walk briskly behind Uncle and the palace attendant.

We cross numerous palatial buildings, finally stopping at Yong An Palace. He bows to Uncle before proceeding through the palace doors. Soon, a purple-ranked attendant steps out from inside.

"The empress dowager summons a meeting with Han Jun, the Archduke Jing."

Despairingly, I watch as Uncle's figure slowly disappears behind the palace doors, leaving me alone to endure the brisk wind's assault.

Seriously, I can't fathom why he has to bring me along to the palace and since he did, he should tell me what's going on. I mean, don't stay hushed as if it's something super duper mysterious.

I take a scan around. Where the hell are those palace maids who dress all fancy that are usually here? I can't see any of them now. *Sigh*. I can't even find anyone to chat with to kill some time.

To ease my boredom, I pull out the pendant around my neck and study it. It's a hard and compacted piece of white nephrite carved in relief with a very smooth surface. Two interlocking phoenixes join in a loop and short bamboo-ridges⁸¹ line the insides. The lightest percolated parts have a pale, buttery hue, almost like lard.

'With what doth one bind a relationship? A beauteous cincture adorned with a jade pendant.'⁸²

These two lines of poetry pop into my head. I grip the jade tightly, my heart languishing for some reason.

Choosing to leave, was I right or was I wrong?

Why did I accept his jade if I didn't want anything to do with him?

My mind is momentarily muddled and a whole lot of inquiries circle around restlessly, making it hard to process my thoughts.

"Sir Han?" The purple-ranked attendant approaches with a smile. Alarmed, I stuff the pendant back in and follow him up the steps of Yong An Palace.

'Sir,' 'Golden Guardian'—I scoff. It sure sounds fancy but it's a trifling rank within the strict martial ranking system of Great Rui. This is all illusory: positions like the Golden Guardian are just pretty titles the emperor bestows on sons of the high-ranking officials.

I fix my posture, pausing shortly at the doors before stepping in quietly. Yong An Palace is the empress dowager's living quarters; the decor is antique and splendid. I go past a k'o-ssu⁸³ screen embroidered with clouds and enter a large room.

The floor is completely covered by a carpet and there is a familiar aroma in the air. A dark red drop curtain hides the back wall. An extravagantly dressed woman is reclining on her seat with her eyes closed and her right hand holding up her head, beads dangling on her forehead. Many exquisitely made tall lamp stands line the wall, tiny flames burning silently in the simple but regal hall. The entire place has a queenly atmosphere to it.

Uncle is sitting slantwise on a chair beside the woman and nods at me. I get down on my knees, lower my gaze and brows and utter the proper greetings. Only after a pause do I hear her speak in that aged, dry voice of hers.

"Enough. You have never once been sincere with your greetings."

I get up, lips puckered, but I keep my head down—I don't like seeing those eyes of hers. They're indecipherable, filled with things I can't comprehend. I've guessed before. It's hatred, or maybe regret, or maybe it's just pity?

"You have recently come back from the front lines. Do you have anything interesting for **me**?"

Uhh. There's absolutely nothing interesting about war. It's just blood and guts flying everywhere. And even if there was something interesting, I wouldn't have had time to remember it. I rant on in my mind but I smile politely. "What does Your Graciousness wish to hear?"

Lazily, she finally opens her eyes, her expression colder than ever. "You're going to talk in circles even with me, huh?"

"I dare not." I keep my head lowered. "There were many trivial matters at the front lines and General Zhou had led a busy schedule, therefore I did not pay much attention to other things. Please be more specific, Your Graciousness."

She laughs dryly with her eyes half closed.

The empress dowager is along in years. The thick cosmetics that the palace maids put on her can no longer hide the crow's feet by her eyes. The elaborate palace apparel wraps around her aging body. No matter how energetic she is, her expression still gives off a lethargic air. Pungent perfumes enter my nose again and it starts feeling stuffy as an illusion of suffocation constricts my chest.

"You are the one who came back from the Yan base alive. Tell me, what is it actually like there?"

Alarmed, I lower myself even more and, after some thought, briefly talk about what I've experienced since my imprisonment. Of course, I omit certain details.

The empress dowager and Uncle exchange an ambiguous look while I'm standing here with my heart pounding like a drum.

The Wraiths under Uncle's command could enter the Yan military camp in secrecy and transport Duke Yu Qing's remains. They were also able to recover me under tight supervision. If that is so, Uncle must be well-informed of what's going on in there, so there is no need to ask me.

“You, come here.”

Obediently, I approach and stop one step away from her. She pulls a smile and the corners of her eyes crinkle. “A memorial spoke of the presence of the Lupine Blood Mounted Squadron. Have you ever caught sight of them?”

I nod after much contemplating.

Uncle and the empress dowager are both sly and devious and I don’t want to die yet, so I answer. “I have seen them once during my imprisonment.”

“Hmm. And how was that?”

I squint, pretending as though I’m trying hard to remember. “The Lupine Blood Mounts are fierce and cruel—‘tis common knowledge. Unfortunately, I only saw their numerous war flags that seemed to cover the entire land with blood, but I was merely a prisoner and only saw that much.”

She sits up straight, gazing at me. “Han Xin, since when did you learn to be so artful with your words?”

I bow down respectfully again. “This unworthy servant dares not.”

“How come you do not know any more after being in the base for so long?”

“I beseech Your pardon, Your Graciousness, I was only a prisoner. Everything had to be done under the watch of enemy soldiers so I could not serve my country properly. For that I feel the utmost shame.”

Uncle remains silent while scrutinizing me.

I feel so aggrieved now. Man, I was imprisoned and no one gave a shit about me. Now that I’ve made it out alive I get interrogated like I know everything.

Despite what I think, I remain silent and press my body even lower to the floor.

This place is too stuffy. I need to get out of here.

I spy the empress dowager sitting up properly, concealing her aged posture. She stays emotionless. “Then what are their numbers, your rough estimate?”

Is that supposed to be a trick question?

“I heard from Minister Han that they number two hundred thousand strong,” I respond.

They share another look before turning to me again. I have nothing to fear, so I meet them.

If I had snooped around for those military details, I would’ve died ten times over!

She leans on the arm of the chair as a tiny smile spreads on her face. Then she says to Uncle, “Minister Han, this is the nephew you have brought up.”

Her smile makes my hairs stand up but Uncle is Uncle after all, able to keep his composure even if the sky were falling down, and doesn’t even blink.

She gets down from her throne and stops in front of me, peering at me out of the corner of her eye. “Your name is definitely Han, but are you really one of us?”

Her icy smile seems to freeze me over, starting from the soles of my feet and into my bones.

When I was young, Uncle would often bring me into the palace when he went to discuss national issues with the empress dowager, and I would play with the emperor who was close to my age. However, sometimes, she would give me this look while letting out a barely audible sigh.

I admit I'm a bit witty with my words at times but I never understand what she means; neither do I read what's in those sharp, gleaming eyes of hers.

Abruptly, she lifts her hand, the varnish on it about to crack off any minute. Her eyes flash with menacing hostility. I back away in alarm.

"Aunt!" Uncle shoots up and cuts between us. She stops, hand in midair, light reflecting eerily off the varnish on her sharp nails. She points her chin up and takes another step forward.

"What're you standing there for!" Uncle barks. I brace myself and scurry out without even performing the right rituals. When I swerve around the screen, I glimpse a figure but it's too late and we collide together.

Maid Xiu hasn't fallen over only because she held on to the screen. She looks wide-eyed at me, to which I reply by pointing behind me and shrugging.

"I hope you haven't forgotten about what you promised, Auntie!"

I catch the empress dowager's bitter voice. "For twelve years! I've been regretting every day of it!"

Her voice cuts off into sobs. Maid Xiu glances towards that direction and says in a hushed tone. "Her Graciousness has been under stress from various matters recently and would sometimes lose Her composure when extremely angered, so..." She signals to the door while saying this. Seeing her teary eyes, I nod and hurry out of the building.

The empress dowager's furious words are still echoing in my ears: "That devil! I'd rather he was never born! He's the same as him! Always defying me!"

I stop and look back. What in the world is she saying?

When I exit the palace, the glowing clouds are chasing the setting sun and the square in front of the palace is soaked in a bloody crimson. A few eunuchs and maidservants speed past with their heads lowered like stiff puppet dolls.

After a long wait, Uncle still hasn't come out yet. I look back to see Yong An Palace towering, mute and unspoken, with the bloody sinking sun as the backdrop. I lean on the white balustrade and stare at the solid grey tiles, motionless as I zone out.

My head starts aching after getting blown by the freezing wind for too long. I rub my temples as I glance over at the palace steps. They start to sway and become blurry in my vision. Furiously, I blink my eyes but a sudden, unbearable pain stings my skull and wrecks havoc, piercing me like a million needles and thorns. I can't help but lower my head, my body shuddering as I lean on the balustrade for support.

For some reason, I would suffer an intolerable headache every time I try to remember my past or look at the balustrade and steps in front of Yong An Palace. The worst times it felt like I'd only get release if I cracked my skull open in half.

I hear quiet footsteps and I turn to look, only to see the purple-ranked attendant walking briskly up the steps with someone close behind him. I can't see the person's face but what I can see is his upright but casual posture and swift steps, dressed in a wide-collared loose-sleeved black robe, with hair coiffed high on the head, heading straight for Yong An Palace.

⁷¹ See below for picture.

⁷² This may be done with one person or a group. See below for picture.

⁷³ Songs were often sung while dancing. See below for picture.

⁷⁴ This line of poetry comes from what seems to be a folk poem with its author unknown.

⁷⁵ Pun on Wang Shu's family name. 望 (*wang4*) as a verb means 'to regard' so this line could be understood as 'regarding the top courtesan at Jade House,' or 'Wang, the top courtesan, is at Jade House.'

⁷⁶ Women were seen to belong to men, so it was customary to describe a woman as the daughter, wife or concubine of a man.

⁷⁷ Courtesans could be chosen to stay in the palace and serve the emperor if he finds her worthy.

⁷⁸ 太(*tai4*) 清(*qing1*), literally 'grand clear.'

⁷⁹ Tortoises and cranes are animals with relatively long life spans and thus represent longevity.

⁸⁰ Usually, this is a path that only the emperor may walk on and is connected to the main road outside the palace, but I think here it just means a main path in the palace grounds.

⁸¹ A traditional style of texture or surface for pottery named for its resemblance to bamboo. See below for picture.

⁸² A line in a poem by Po Qin (? – 218) called 定情詩, which I translate as 'an oath of love (in the form of an ode).' At the time the poem was written, a woman tied a colourful cloth around her waist to signify that she was taken.

⁸³ A traditional style of tapestry that is very time-consuming to produce and shows the same designs on both sides of the fabric. The name literally means 'cut silk.'

XX: Content of the Present

Despite the bias for the letters over martial arts since the founding of the country, there is not one person, not in the imperial court nor in the dirtiest alleyways, who doesn't know of one particular man—a soldier.

Heng Ziyu, the Protector of the Seas—the number one in the Great Rui military world.

Born a commoner in Huizhou⁸⁴, he joined the army at the age of seventeen and was drafted into the Colonel of Xuan Wei's⁸⁵ army as the Captain of Yi Hui⁸⁶ at nineteen. In the Fourth Year of Yong Guang⁸⁷, the County Governor of North Dian⁸⁸ abused his military power and colluded with the local natives of Lin⁸⁹. Under the royal edict, the Colonel of Xuan Wei led his troops west and as the Captain of Yi Hui, Heng Ziyu launched into battle. The troops fought head-on at first and later when they were cutting through a patch of thick forest, they ran into obstinate Hill Barbarians⁹⁰ who would not surrender. In a fury, Heng Ziyu killed the entire tribe, and utterly defeated the Lin natives along the way, fully recovering North Dian. Thus he was raised up to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel of You Ji⁹¹.

In the Sixth Year of Yong Guang, the County of Jin An suffered from pirate attacks. Under the royal edict, Heng Ziyu defended the land. After overcoming the plague and flooding, he determinedly ordered for the destruction of the dam and the relentless pursuit of the pirates. Since then, the pirates have completely lost the ability to violate our borders due to their severe losses.

That year, Heng Ziyu was given the peerage of marquis and the title, Protector of the Seas, on the account of his notable achievements. This is the highest honour a soldier can receive in Great Rui.

Right now, this person whom the storytellers describe as some sort of mythical creature is standing right in front of me. Despite being a martial official, he is not wearing his armour but instead a solid black robe. His gait is confident and majestic while a stern look manifests in his eyes, making it look like a military march.

The attendant goes inside to notify his arrival. Heng Ziyu stands by the white balustrade with his arms crossed and regards the palaces and halls in the distance. Once in a while, when he glances over to me, his lips would curve and I feel as if I'm being looked down upon.

“A Golden Guardian?” he wonders out loud.

As a son of the rich who has received this high-paying position on the account of my family background, it's only natural to get condescending looks from those who fought their way up from the bottom of the chain and attained their fortunes themselves. I let out an airy laugh and look away. I don't want to speak with him.

He scoffs. "I've always heard that Minister Han is very strict when it comes to governing the country and his own house. Good for him, sending his own blood out to war when our country is in need."

I grunt in reply, peering over. "What's the point in pointing out things we both know, Marshal Heng?"

He leans on the balustrade, watching the hovering clouds up above. "Because you count for at least half a warrior."

"I'm naught but a Guardian. You're overstating matters." I stare at the palace doors, hoping Uncle would come out sooner.

He scans my face then his gaze moves downwards, stopping at my hands. "You've swung a sword and used the bow, so you count for at least half a warrior."

I look down at the thick calluses in between my two thumbs and forefingers that won't seem to go away. They were from the training I did with the old geezer in my youth, which was only so I could protect myself and leave this place. With that though in mind, I ball my hands tightly and look up at him. "And I guess now you're going to ask me if I know how to ride a horse or if I've killed before."

He lets out a humourless guffaw but then says calmly. "All you young, ostentatious nobles are in pursuit of recognition but never do you consider the pains and suffering of the people."

With nothing to counter that, I look away again.

There is a bias for scholastics, yet the wars never seem to end. The people have lost their homes, the crops and fields have all been abandoned, and after the unexpected drought, the death toll caused by hunger and war has amounted to the tens of thousands. The people's multiplying grievance is no longer a secret so Heng Ziyu's words are not that surprising.

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye. "The Yan army is right outside our walls and you as the marshal still have the time to lounge around?"

He lets out a short chuckle. "As you said, I am the marshal, so on what basis do you dare surmise the thoughts of a marshal?" He points his chin up. "You would have gotten the stick if you were my soldier."

I let my smile fade and hold my tongue.

Everyone has been saying that he has had plans of treason since a long time ago. The senior court officials have considered getting rid of him now that he has served his purpose, but they were wary of his military power and the unstable borders in the south so they never acted. Likewise, Heng Ziyu only pays superficial respect to the court, and the situation remains in a delicate balance.

But now, with the arrival of the Yan army, it appears that this equilibrium is about to be tipped over.

“Unfortunately, I’m not your soldier, and I have never pursued recognition. You’ve overlooked that fact, Marshal.”

He glances at me, his smile still evident. “You, too, have overlooked the fact you haven’t come across an opportunity for you to do so.”

Disgusted, I remove my gaze. I can’t quite put my finger on it but there’s something about him that I really don’t like. Is it the craving for power? Or maybe it’s the thirst for accomplishment?

“I’m standing in this spot again but the view looks different this time.” He laughs abruptly, his booming laughter chilling to the bone unlike any other I’ve heard.

“In that case, wouldn’t it be even better if you viewed the imperial city from the top of Tai Qing Palace?” I hiss lowly and walk to the top of the steps.

His expression falters for a moment before it starts to boil with anger. He shoots me a hard look to which I smirk and walk down the steps against the wind with a flick of my sleeves.

Who gives a damn about who’s the emperor? There is nothing in this overindulgent world for me and even if there was, it would have to be *him*.



It is very late at night when Uncle comes back from the palace and he doesn’t mention anything that happened, as if it has never happened. I don’t want to bother with it either so the peculiar incident of the day just fades out in time with our purposefully blind eyes.

However, he starts going to the palace more and more frequently and the mansion has been filling up with people; busy and unfamiliar people. A few are armed soldiers and a couple other ones look fairly familiar. I think they’re senior attendants from the palace.

I’m still grounded and the looks I get from him are getting heavier by the day, to the point my stomach twists up. From time to time, I would still try very hard to think of the good things he’s done for me, like the times he stopped my cousins from going overboard with the bullying, or his unspoken permission to let me study a bit of martial arts under Master Liao, and even the position I got as Golden Guardian was because of him...

Only after I swore for the millionth time that I wouldn’t go to Jade House or come back drunk does Uncle give me permission to go out, albeit extremely unwillingly. But—and there is a but—I can’t stay out for more than four hours.

Four hours—what do I do with that? I grumble as I leave the mansion with two tails behind me.

Glancing at the two houseboys trailing behind me, I feel annoyed. Uncle has no need to worry about me running away because security at the city gates has been amped up to check for possible spies.

The people on the street seem slightly spiritless and glum. Even the market place that is usually bustling is now almost deserted. The vendors holler out desperately a few times before sitting back down quietly with a dispirited face.

I run into Song Ruoming and Pei Yuan. Song Ruoming is wearing his green imperial auditor uniform, indicating that he just got out from the morning court. The worry on his face lightens a little when he sees me and he drags me into a tea house after some small talk.

We've just sat down when a conversation at the table next to us catches our attention, stopping our own.

"Have you heard? The emperor isn't in the best of health."

"When is He ever?"

"Then what's gonna happen? His Majesty has no male heir, so if He leaves, who's gonna...?"

I look to Song Ruoming and he nods solemnly while Pei Yuan remains quiet. Word of the emperor's poor health has been going around the streets of the capital, saying his condition is worsening and he might just pass away.

Pei Yuan breaks our silence, saying under his breath. "The call for the relocation's escalating. Many of the larger clans and families have left already." As if to prove his words true, several expensive-looking carriages race through the street, leaving in a whirlwind.

"The empress dowager's been listening behind the curtains⁹² during the morning courts as usual. Just whose empire is this? Hers or the Lin clan's?!" Song Ruoming angrily slaps his pagoda wood⁹³ *hu*⁹⁴ on the table.

"Uncle asked me the other night whether there was a chance of victory if we chose to defend." I mutter, and the two of them stop and watch me.

Pei Yuan then presses, "That's right, you just came back from there. You've seen it with your own two eyes."

I shake my head. "So what if I did? After all this, even those who haven't would know that the Yan kill without a second thought."

Song Ruoming wonders lowly while playing with his tea cup. "If His Majesty really were to leave, who would be there to inherit the throne?"

I take a moment before answering. "The closest bloodline would have to be Mu De⁹⁵, eldest son of Duke Yu Qing, but he's just turned one. The next closest would be Duke of Yan Ning⁹⁶, son of Duke Qi Huai⁹⁷, but he's only seven. Even if they were to-."

"What good is a one or a seven year old?!" Pei Yuan thunders. "They'd just end up as her puppets anyways!"

The loud chatter in the tea house dies down instantly and I feel numerous eyes lock on us. I turn to see almost everyone staring at us with all sorts of expressions. My lips twitch. That sure went well.

As he hurriedly drags Pei Yuan out, Song Ruoming scolds, "Why can't you just keep calm?" Pei Yuan digs his heels in and doesn't say a word. Seeing that I mediate, "C'mon, you know how he is. Just let it go."

“The successor is gonna be whoever the empress dowager names. She has the final say anyway.”

As we’re chatting, all I see are the bobbing heads of the pedestrians on the busy street. Suddenly I hear the pounding of hooves on the road and it is approaching fast. The pedestrians all scatter out of the way, forming a clear path, and the next moment, a cavalry of five hundred zip past amidst the thunderous drumming, causing a gust of wind.

“Outta the way! Outta the way!”

The crowd disperses in alarm at the whip cracks and the three of us get washed along in different directions. I’m knocked all over the place and when I look up I spot a familiar figure.

Heng Ziyu looks as he always does: poised high on horseback dressed in green, his comportment refined, charming and majestic. He scans across the crowd and lingers on me. He pulls a thin smile, one of ridicule, before cracking his whip and driving his steed towards the royal palace.

I forget my steps. I sense that there is more than meets the eye in that smile of his.

Song Ruoming and Pei Yuan make their way over to me after the crowd disperses, looking scruffy and tattered. Song Ruoming brushes off the dirt on him and says, “Even if she were to name a new heir, Heng Ziyu wouldn’t let it go so easily. His army has set up camp around the capital so it’s thin ice she’s stepping on. A new heir, tsk tsk.”

I clean the dirt off of myself too. “New heir? Let them fight it over. We’re just normal citizens.”

When we’re saying our goodbyes, Pei Yuan suddenly asks. “Hey, how many days have you been back?”

“Bout five or six. Why?” I answer after some calculation.

“You might’ve gone to the front lines but you’re still a Golden Guardian; your records are still under the Guardians. Normally, shouldn’t you’ve gone back to work already?”

“Really?” I falter. “Iunno. Uncle never brought it up and he doesn’t really let me go out. Says I should behave and stay in the mansion.”

Pei Yuan scrunches his brows. “That’s weird. Sure, Minister Xie’s son doesn’t needa serve ‘cause he’s kicked the bucket, but you should go now that you’re back. Plus,” he sighs. “Our numbers have been declining so much, from the original five thousand to four, it’s getting hard to even secure and patrol the royal palace.”

“Whoa, why has it declined so much?”

Song Ruoming answers instead, “Right now, the court’s been split up by Marshal Heng and the senior officials. The marshal just transferred one thousand Guardians away a while ago, saying it’s advanced training or something. Sounds all good and proper, all right.”

It is said that Great Rui’s Golden Guardian numbers five thousand strong, each one tall and well-built, and makes a fierce battle formation. However, I’ve also heard Guardian General Xie complaining in private that these five thousand men were all looks, that he didn’t expect them to

amount to much and that he'd be very grateful as long as they didn't participate in any prostitution, gambling, extortion or the sorts.

"If I remember correctly, the Guardian General sides with Minister Xie, right?"

"Mhm. Minister Xie's been in a bad mood lately. They say the lil' bastard, Xie Zhen, died out there."

I laugh drily and change the topic.

That guy, Xie Zhen, had it coming. But for some reason I think of Murong Yu. I wonder how he's doing now that I've been gone for almost a week.

Oh whatever. There's nothing I could do. Xiao Qinyun is there anyways. I don't need to get my panties up in a bunch.



The conflict around South Hill Pass is getting nowhere. The two sides have been in battle for a long time and even though the Yan cavalry have extremely high battle power, they still haven't been able to make it past the walls. Naturally, the Rui army has been completely surrounded, not even able to budge. According to word, all you can see from the top of the wall is a frightening sea of scarlet flags.

General Zhou is posted at the west path and is fighting with the Yan army to the west. The location is easily defensible due to the geological contours but the food supply is insufficient. It seems they cannot hold on for much longer, but once the west path is abandoned, the entire backside of the Pass is going to be exposed for the enemy's viewing pleasure.

Uncle has been going to the palace even more frequently and he's so stressed out that he has cold sores growing on his lips. The only things on the city streets are luxurious carriages speeding through, leaving the capital through Xuan Ping⁹⁸ Gates on the southern end, and cavalymen. They don't even come close to the Yan cavalry though. Great Rui doesn't have a great martial background to begin with so our cavalry is not even worth mentioning.

Life is very dull in the mansion and it makes me think about what Pei Yuan said, so I cautiously bring the idea up with Uncle about me reporting back to my position, but he turns me down right away.

"Why not? I can't just stay here and sponge off of you."

"You have already sponged off of me for more than ten years, what makes the idea so appalling all of a sudden?"

"I just want to do my job as a Guardian." Actually, what I want to say is that at least then I would have something to do and someone to talk and joke with at work.

"I don't think so. I say you just want to go out and fool around." Uncle vetoes me nonchalantly, not one bit moved.

I grumble. “Okay, let’s say I really did wanna do that. It’s still better than staying cooped up here all day. You know I’m just gonna die of boredom.”

“Your days of being cooped up has only just started with a whole lot more to come.” He glances at me emotionlessly. I wail in my mind: *‘You’re used to peace and quiet, Uncle, but don’t drag me into it! I haven’t even hit forty yet.’*

Suddenly he closes his eyes, closing the book in his hands, and points to the seat beside him. “We haven’t sat down for a talk for a while now, nephew. Sit.”

My first reaction is: This is weird. This is really weird—really, really weird. Thus I sit down tentatively while glancing nervously at the door. I sit on the edge of the chair, ready to shoot out the door any minute.

Uncle clears his throat and my stomach twists up in a knot: he started like this, too, when he told me that he enlisted me in the army. I stare at his mouth and beard. His mouth opens and I recite in my head: *‘calm down, calm down, calm down.’*

“Han Xin, how old are you?”

“Um, twenty.”

“Do you have any thoughts about your life? Say,” he taps the table lightly. “A position in the court, or your future?”

I let my uneasiness recede before answering with a smile. “Whatever you think is good for me, Uncle.”

Psh, as if I’d let him choose for me. I’ll make him happy first and then get the hell out of here. I won’t need a pass to leave the city now anyway. Hmm, what should I bring? Clothes, and some cash, and the *xiao*, and the pendant and....

“Are you daydreaming again?” Uncle interrupts my plan.

I focus and put on an oblivious face. “No, no. It just kind of took me by surprise. What you asked.”

He sighs. “I’m constantly busy with work and never paid much attention to you. I just realised today that you are already twenty. I have to make some plans for your future.”

“If I may ask, what do you want me to do?”

“Tell me yourself. What do you want to do?”

What do I want to do? Establish my own empire? Hold ultimate power? Or fame and wealth? I contemplate what it is that Uncle wants from me. He keeps staring at me with a strange expression, kind of like a smile but not quite.

I say after remaining silent. “Would you believe me if I said I have no interest in fame and money?”

“I wouldn’t.” His face darkens.

I smile for some reason. “But you’re not me, Uncle, so how could you know what I think?”

He smiles too. “I’ve seen my fair share of people in the court and I watched you grow up. Of course I know.”

I meet his eyes bravely without a hint of apprehension, all to identify what he's really trying to say. I don't aspire to be much but I don't want to get involved with their cat-and-dog political battles.

"Your eyes, they're like your mother's." He looks away as he murmurs. I snap to attention. This is the first time Uncle has ever mentioned my mother. "She left you in my care. You haven't amounted to much, but we are still related by blood-."

"Uncle, stop please!" I interrupt and stand up, unable to keep listening.

"I appreciate your concern, Uncle, but," I glare at him. "I'd rather hold my own life in my own hands, and not let someone else control it!"

He looks somewhere else and the smile on his face disappears. I stride out the door and he suddenly gets up, yelling, "Give up that thought, Han Xin! You will never escape your fate!"

I stop, turn and look into Uncle's stone-cold eyes. It's dead silent in the room. My head starts throbbing and it feels like the world is caving in on me, suffocating me.

"Master." The butler rushes into the study, faltering when he sees me, and reports that Minister Xie and the Protector of the Seas are here to visit and are waiting in the front lobby. I don't make another sound and leave.

Taking a turn in the gallery, I spot Xie Yun and Heng Ziyu coming towards the study under the houseboy's guidance. As I pivot out of the way, Xie Yun gives me a small nod. When I brush past Heng Ziyu, I hear him whispering, "So we meet again, Guardian."

I leave as though I haven't heard him.



Master Liao has come back. He has come back when so many are leaving, but I'm still glad to see him.

In the late evening, he drags me out from my room and tells me he brought back some wine from his hometown for me. I was just restlessly tossing and turning around on my bed anyway so we pick a quiet spot and start drinking.

After listening to my edited version of my experiences, he laughs at me. "But you're here now, aren't you?"

I take a sip. "You're here, too. Everyone's trying to get out but no, you just had to come back. You know the capital's not safe, right?"

He keeps a nonchalant face. "How could I leave when there's someone I need to protect?"

I freeze, my mouth forming an 'O,' the wine cup mere inches away from it. I stutter nonsense while pointing at him before finally getting a well-formed sentence out. "N-no way!"

Master Liao keeps drinking his wine as if I only said something like 'Nice weather we got today.' He peers at me out of the corner of his eye. "Why, I can't say that?"

His eyes dim when he says this and he looks a bit blue, as though something's weighing on his mind. It takes a few moments of pondering for me to guesstimate and I scoot over and nudge him. "Which noble daughter did you fall in love with, Master? Who is she married to now?"

He glares at me as if I poured burning water on him. "You lil' punk, what in the world goes on in that head of yours?"

I flash an innocent look. "But all the storytellers in the city say so." I let my imagination take over, ignoring his reaction. "Once upon a time, you were a handsome and well-mannered student but you were a commoner while she was a beautiful noble's daughter. You fell in love at the temple and met in private. Your love multiplied by the day. But one day, her father discovered your love. Enraged, he separated Juliet from Romeo and married her off to this other son of a high-ranking official. Reluctantly, you said your goodbyes and then you became a teacher in the capital all so you can see her again one day. And now the capital's in danger so you're staying to protect her."

Master Liao takes a swing just as I finish my tale. I dodge it cleverly and giggle. "See, I was right, wasn't I? You were trying to silence me."

"You lil' punk, you should go tell stories on the streets." His face has gone back to normal and he has turned to regard the darkness of the night.

"But," I add. "I remember you being here in the mansion when I was really young. Do you not have a wife?"

He shakes his head and we fall quiet again. I take tiny sips of my wine, not knowing what to say.

I kind of feel like Master Liao is shouldering something very heavy. His eyes are always dark and obscure. A chilly air exudes from him even when he's under the sun. He's a learned scholar, but at the same time he's also a talented martial artist. Sometimes I wonder what his story must be like.

Noticing my distracted state, he raises his left arm, catching the fan that slides out, and raps me hard on the head. I hiss out in pain and glare at him. He smiles a little but his eyes are cold and emotionless. "How is it? Any good? I brought it all the way from Feng Hai⁹⁹—Jian Chang¹⁰⁰ red wine."

I take a big whiff. It smells aromatic and sweet and it tastes fresh and bitter-sweet. The strange thing is that it's my first time drinking it but I feel like I've drunk or smelled it before. "I like it. It has a...a..."

"A familiar flavor, right?"

I gape at him. "How did you know that?"

He closes his fan and pulls a small smile. "Your face told me everything."

"Hmmp." I dismiss.

"As your teacher, I advise you to not let your thoughts show through your face. You must do your best to make your happiness and anger look the same. Always keep the same facade. That way no one would be able to guess what you're thinking."

I'm a bit distracted by his fan so I blurt out. "I'm not gonna work in the court. What do I need a poker face for?"

He sighs after studying me and changes the subject. "Do you have someone you like?"

Master Liao's fan is called Notos, for the autumn wind, and is an excellent—no—superb—no—exceptional fan. It seems like a normal fan but it's the deadliest weapon that he keeps on himself. Poisonous needles and thin razor-sharp blades amongst other things are all hidden in it, combining a stylish prop and a defensive weapon into one.

"Uhh, yeah I guess." I realise almost as soon as I say the words that I shouldn't have and I cover my mouth. When I look at him, he looks sort of stunned but he recovers. "Once a teacher, always a father,"¹⁰¹ and you can say anything to your father."

I shake my head. He urges. "So my boy has someone he likes. What's the big deal?"

I lower my head, feeling the pendant around my neck burning for some reason, scorching through my skin and imprinting into my heart.

Like—do I like him? Maybe I do, or else I wouldn't have let it slip just now. But there's nothing I can do no matter how much I like him. The difference in our class, our warring countries, our gender—what future could we have?

An image of him surfaces before my eyes, of his eyes, of his air, of his words. How could I forget anything? From the conflicts and battles in the beginning, to the mutual understanding later on, to the unification as one in the end, everything and anything.

Is that...is that love?

I don't know. All I know is I want to see him. I really, really want to. Better yet, I want to see him right this instant. I want him to kiss me. I want him to hold me.

Then why the hell did I insist on leaving him and living my own life?

I feel moisture welling out of the corners of my eyes. Hurriedly, I pretend to look away and wipe it away.

The bonding of one night might just be my most precious memory from now on.

Master Liao pats me on the shoulders. "If it's hard to deal with by yourself, I won't think little of you."

I sniff. "It's nothing."

"To be troubled by love makes one an adult. As a person, it's something everyone has to face in their lifetime." He mentions, "I remember you play the *xiao*. Would you mind playing for me?"

I go and retrieve the battered *xiao* from my room. I sit back down and place the *xiao* by my lips. The limpid notes of the *Cries of Soaring Swan Geese* slowly rise and float off into the clear sky, echoing throughout the night.

"The *Cries of Soaring Swan Geese*—a song of longing." Master Liao suddenly gets up and recites. "Yesterday has abandoned me, I should not linger; today troubles me, stirring my mind a mess."¹⁰²

Suddenly, footsteps approach from the gallery side and I can see flickering flames. The butler runs by, shouting in a wavering voice, "Master, messengers have come from the palace saying the empress dowager has summoned you!"

Master Liao's face darkens even more as if it were enshrouded by frost. He whispers, "I fear this late a summon means trouble in the royal city tonight."

⁸⁴ A historical region roughly in present day Anhui Province. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huizhou_\(region\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huizhou_(region)) for more details.

⁸⁵ Xuan Wei is the name of the title, not the person's name, literally meaning 'announce might.' This is a Rank 4 to 5 position (varying throughout the dynasties) in the military division of the imperial court, Rank 9 being the lowest rank possible. For more details on the ranking of officials see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine-rank_system.

⁸⁶ Yi Hui is the name of the title, not the person's name, literally meaning 'deputy (of) army.' This is a Rank 7 position in the military division of the imperial court of the Tang and Song dynasties, Rank 9 being the lowest rank possible. For more details on the ranking of officials see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine-rank_system.

⁸⁷ 永(yong3) 光(guang1), literally meaning 'eternal light,' is an era name implemented by the emperor at the time.

⁸⁸ Dian is the old name for Yunnan Province.

⁸⁹ This is the same character as the ruling clan of Rui (林), but here it's the name of the natives and most likely means 'people of the forest.'

⁹⁰ An ancient tribe that used to reside near Guilin, Guangxi. This name is a literal translation due to the little information I could find.

⁹¹ You Ji is the name of the title, not the person's name, literally meaning 'attack (while) moving,' and 'guerrilla' in modern Chinese. This is a Rank 5 position in the military division of the imperial court of the Tang and Song dynasties, Rank 9 being the lowest rank possible.

⁹² Empress dowagers often had to govern the country in place of an emperor who was too young to do so, and due to the culture of the division of men and women, a curtain, veil or screen had to be set up so the male officials could not see the empress dowager.

⁹³ *Styphnolobium japonicum*, also called the Chinese scholar tree.

⁹⁴ A flat, long board made of various materials that was held by court officials during morning courts as a memo as it usually lasted for many hours.

⁹⁵ 沐(mu4) 德(de2), literally 'moisten (with) virtue.' This is his title, not given name.

⁹⁶ 延(yan2) 寧(ning2), literally 'extend serenity.'

⁹⁷ 齊(qi2) 懷(huai2), literally '(in) memory (of) Qi.' Qi refers to an area that covers northeastern Shandong Province and southeast Hebei Province. This Duke is most likely dead at the time of the utterance.

⁹⁸ 宣(xuan1) 平(ping2), literally 'announce peace.'

⁹⁹ 楓(feng1) 海(hai3), literally 'maple sea.' This is the name of a county, of which the 'county' is omitted for flow of dialogue.

¹⁰⁰ 建(jian4) 昌(chang1), literally 'build prosperity,' is the name of several places throughout history.

¹⁰¹ This is a saying that exemplifies the status and prestige of teachers in Classical China, although this may or may not hold true now.

¹⁰² The first two lines from Li Bai's poem, 宣州謝朓樓餞別校書叔云, roughly translated as 'Bidding Farewell to My Uncle Yun, the Imperial Librarian, at Xietiao Tower in Xuanzhou.'

XXI: *Intimate Distance*

Wearing a full set of Golden Guardian armour, I follow behind Uncle briskly to the palace.

As we draw near the royal city, Uncle looks back and instructs, “Remember, better safe than sorry.”

I catch Uncle quickly scanning the Guardians standing guard at the royal gates with wary eyes. “You must pay close attention to the Guardian General, especially to what he does.” Only after I nod to show my understanding does he nod with furrowed brows and enter the gates, hurrying towards Yong An Palace under an attendant’s guidance.

I stride past soldiers standing guard and enter the royal palace. I look up at the ink black sky, then at the hazy palatial buildings. The grand halls are enshrouded by a thick, black fog, making the shapes ambiguous. It’s only the fourth watch¹⁰³ now so what could be going on?

Uncle’s Wraiths had given a general report along the way. Just a while ago, the empress dowager assembled the Golden Guardians and other royal guards and placed the palace under maximum security. The Minister of Defense, Xie Yun, has already put his defense troops around the capital into action, and Heng Ziyu also has strategic points inside the capital under heavy guard with his own men. All of the capital’s gates have heightened security. The atmosphere in the capital is suddenly tense.

Time trickles by. The torches high on the palace walls accompanied by the dawn peeking through the horizon refract off of the Golden Guardians’ plates. I ponder silently about the current situation. Surely, it’s an emergency of sorts, otherwise the various parties would not be so anxious. But if it really came down to it, I doubt these pretty looking soldiers could do much.

I bite my lips. Could it be that the emperor is departing this life?

Quickly, I push forward, trying to find an acquaintance or two to catch up on what’s going on. Along the way, I see the palace under tight security with Guardians on patrol every hundred yards or so. None of the palace doors are opened and I can’t seem to find anyone I know. I grab a random soldier over and ask. He replies after some thought, “I just saw the Guardian General heading towards Tai Qing Palace.”

There are rows upon rows of soldiers in front of Tai Qing Palace and court doctors are coming and going with their heads lowered. When the Guardian General finally comes out, I hurriedly grab and ask him. Strictly speaking, he is Xie Zhen's younger cousin. He looks solemn as he whispers in my ears after making sure no one is around us. "His Majesty's condition worsened last night. I don't think He'll last much longer."

"What?!" I almost hear a buzz in my ears. I stare blankly at him, trying to wrap my head around this. Everyone knows His Majesty is ill year-long but this has come too soon to take in.

With the war in a critical period, everyone is anxious, and not to mention the hungry wolves eyeing the throne, so if His Majesty goes—worst case scenario—Great Rui goes. His Majesty may be ill but he still holds the Mandate of Heaven. As long as he's here, the delicate balance can still be maintained, and the relocation may not happen as easily either. I gaze at Tai Qing Palace concealed in the dark with butterflies in my stomach.

Seeing this, he pats me on the shoulders, sighing. "'Tis troubling times."

I stay outside the Palace after he leaves, watching the sky lighten bit by bit and the dawn light breaking through in the east. A new day. A new start. But will it mean fortune or misfortune for Great Rui?

A purple-ranked attendant comes running from behind, saying quietly. "The empress dowager has summoned you, Sir Han."

Without a word, I let him lead me to Yong An Palace. Spotting the white steps and balustrade in front of it, my head starts throbbing slightly again. The attendant turns to me, saying, "Sir Han, the empress dowager wishes to see the pendant around your neck. Would you mind handing it to me?"

I falter for a moment before taking it off for him. Thank goodness I switched the pendants last night while changing. I just found it a bit difficult to look at. I thought I shouldn't keep wearing it if I had chosen to leave in the first place.

Standing at the top of the steps, my head starts to pound and throb again as if something was struggling to burst out but it can't for some reason. I hold onto the balustrade as a wave of pain strikes through me, tearing at my heart and lungs. My vision whirs around. I pant for air and hold tightly onto the railing as the things before me go blurry.

I hate this place. This happens every single time.

After resting against the balustrade for quite a while, the pain slowly fades away. Beads of sweat cover my forehead. I take off my helmet and gently wipe it off. My mind seems to clear up more as I breathe in air.

The attendant still hasn't come back out, so I just keep waiting outside quietly. Soon, I hear someone approaching and curiously, it's Pei Yuan. He grabs and pulls me along without saying anything the moment he sees me. I fling his arm away and point to the Palace. He looks in the direction but hisses quietly, "His Majesty wants to see you!"

I'm taken by surprise and an ominous feeling clings onto me. His Majesty?

It's dead silent in the enormous palace hall. Attendants and maids stand wordlessly behind the curtains and the court officials have all gathered in the centre. The front row mostly consists of high-ranking ones, including Uncle looking detached and pale. Heng Ziyu is standing with hands clasped behind his back and a cool, stiff expression. The other officials are also looking reserved. I lower my head and eyes as I step into the grand hall, those butterflies in my stomach even more restless now: I have no idea why His Majesty would summon me.

Uncle sees me and coughs before telling me solemnly, "Han Xin, His Majesty wishes to see you."

A bit caught off guard, I blurt out, "Why would His Majesty want to see me?"

He shoots me a cold look. "Shut up and just go." I clench my jaw and follow the attendant towards the inner hall. When I walk past Heng Ziyu, I spot a heavy shadow over his eyes and a sly smile on his lips.

It's also silent in the inner hall and only the pungent scent of herbs lingers in the air. This is where the emperor, the emperor who is only two years my elder, lives. I'm not sure how I feel about that. Wordlessly, I pass the hanging veils and swerve around a nine dragon jade screen. I quickly kneel down when I catch sight of the Emperor's bed.

I hear a feeble sigh and some small movements coming from the emperor. "Is that...Han Xin?"

I nod. "It is I, your humble servant."

I spy his arm reaching out from the bed, dangling weakly. "I don't remember...seeing you for some time." He waves to me with effort. "Come."

I do as he says, getting up but keeping my body bent nonetheless.

He is deadly pale, heavy circles surround his eyes and he is breathing so roughly he almost cannot talk. He only watches me steadily with a strange expression. I start feeling a bit weirded out by it so I quietly call him a few times. Only then does he regain his focus. "You...you have changed quite a bit."

I quickly reply. "Your servant hasn't, Your Majesty."

He chuckles softly. "Really? You haven't, while I feel like I am getting weaker and weaker."

I feel a bitter pang in my chest. His Majesty is two years older than me but has always been weak. He even needs someone serving medicine for him during morning court. It came to the point that he couldn't deal with national matters by himself and has to do so through an assistant. I still remember he called me into the royal palace right after my coming-of-age ceremony¹⁰⁴ and ranted on and on about how boring and constrained life as emperor was.

"You...are still the same...fooling around with your gang of scoundrels...right?" He laughs out loud and life seems to reappear in his eyes. "How nice...to be able...to be free."

I try to keep my feelings down. "I beg that You don't say that, Your Majesty. You are god-sent. This servant cannot compare to You."

He shakes his head weakly, eyes staring at the door. "I'm not...joking. I'm actually...the most pathetic...I've nothing."

“Your Majesty!”

Intermittently, he keeps going in his breathy voice. “Do you...remember we...climbed on the roof of Tai Qing Palace...when we were kids...and looked over the capital...that feeling...the wind in your ears, it was like...you were flying.”

He was in better shape in his earlier years and we would horse around all over the place. Tai Qing Palace is the most magnificent and solemn palace in the royal city of Great Rui and is the place where emperors ascend the throne. Even though we got punished severely by the empress dowager, he was still very enthusiastic and told me in private that he would do it again when he got the chance. With that in mind, I can’t help but feel miserable, but a ghost of a smile appears on his face.

“I’m...afraid...I won’t have another chance.”

Immediately, I kneel down and bow forward, shaking. “Your Majesty, I beg of you. You’re the owner of this realm. You will definitely have another chance.”

He raises his quivering hand, pointing towards the door. “You have no idea...how much I want to see it once more...just once.”

I lift up my head in alarm and stare dumbly at him. The pink in his lips has completely drained and his eyes start to lose focus. “Even if...I am the emperor...I cannot do...anything...I am going to...get scolded...by Emperor Shun...when I get to the royal hills¹⁰⁵, aren’t I?” Then he starts coughing really loudly. “I...couldn’t...do...a thing.”

I can’t take it anymore. I grab his hand and croak. “It’s not your fault, Your Majesty. You are a good emperor.”

He holds my hand with a deathly grasp, twinkles increasing in his eyes. “Say...do you think...there’s a next life?”

I move my head up and down with force. “Yes, I’m sure there is.”

He looks steadily at me and then turns away and laughs. “Good...even if I...were to be a human next time¹⁰⁶...I don’t want...to be born a royalty.”

I gape at him as if struck by lightning. I just watch him fixedly, not a word coming out of my opened mouth. He blinks and then suddenly cracks an eerie smile at me. “You’re...not much better off...actually...you and I...we have the same fate...and there’s no escape.”

Out of shock, I pull my hand away, drawing back. I watch as he props himself up slowly. He keeps that miserable smile on his face while looking at me. “You...at least you’ve had...a taste of freedom.”

My ears start to ring. I back away, bumping into the jade screen. I save myself from falling only by holding on to it.

The emperor’s gone mad. Mad, I tell you.

I scamper out the door, not even stopping to help up the maid I knock down, out the inner hall and through all of the curious and the alarmed stares in the outer hall, leaving them all behind me.



News of the emperor's demise break out at night—the Son of God has returned to the heavens.

Pure white and black drapes are hung from the towering Tai Qing Palace, signifying the passing of an emperor of Great Rui. The Former Emperor's casket rests in Tai Qing Palace. The court historians style his posthumous name as 'Wen¹⁰⁷.'

I'm standing outside the hall, quietly gazing at the giant buildings. The impenetrable darkness unfurls its vast wings, enveloping the entire royal city within its embrace, obscuring all sight, like a vicious beast waiting to devour its next victim with its mouth wide-open.

The empress dowager is one strong woman. Normally, other mothers would be bawling their eyes out if they had to witness their child's death, but no, not her. She just has to be strong and not show one bit of vulnerability. She paces up the hall with the help of her maids. She's dressed in complete white mourning apparel. Half of the hair on her head has gone white. Tearless, wordless, she only gently slides her palm on the casket.

I regard the ghostly figures from afar and feel an abrupt chill running through my core. Quickly, I scan around myself. The maids and guards are in white mourning apparel too, all kneeling or standing rigidly like statues. The entire royal palace is covered in pale white, appearing utterly lifeless.

Just what horrors lie in the darkness around me?

What exactly is this fate they keep talking about?

Even if I have some particular history, they should make up their mind—say it or don't say it at all. I hate people leaving me hanging halfway. I smash my fist on the wall. Fate—my fate—what the hell is it? Why is everyone being so goddamn secretive about it?

I rest my forehead on the wall and close my eyes. I'm shuddering. Fuck this place. It's going to drive me insane. I need to get out of here. I need to leave!

"Guardian, are you mourning for His Majesty there or are you about to fall asleep?"

I glance sideways to see Heng Ziyu standing not far from me with that same old smirk and casual composure, only wearing white this time. I take a deep breath and say in the calmest voice I can manage, "His Majesty has just passed away, so I advise you to keep that smile in check."

He steps closer, tilting his head back, and his eyes flash. "So what if I smile?"

I force a smile. "The brave Marshal has nothing to fear of course, but," I remark as I hold onto the wall. "But surely you've heard of the saying: 'A lack of forbearance now may upset the grand scheme of things.'"

He takes a scan around us, his eyes sharp like a hawk's, and smirks before taking another step towards me. "Are you going to tell on me, Guardian Han?"

I straighten up and shoot him a look. "Good men don't work in the dark. I still have duties, unfortunately. Please excuse me, Marshal."

“Duties defending the palace?” He scoffs. “Do you really think this place is still worth defending?”

I feel anger welling up. Even if he does have plans to rebel, he should at least show some respect even if he doesn’t have any in his heart when the Former Emperor has only just passed away. In contrary to my fury, I shoot him a scornful look. “His Majesty hasn’t yet been buried. It would be wise to refrain from any misconduct.”

The emperor has just departed, his remains just beginning to cool. Whoever causes a scene and disrespects the Mandate of Heaven at this time will be charged with the crime of insulting the crown, no matter how strong of an army he might have.

The moon lingers on one side of his face, appearing as a silver chip. I see one brow of his raise in slight anger. “I suppose I should thank you for the advice, huh.”

“Hmph. Any time, Marshal.”

I turn to leave but he stops me with a raised arm. He pulls a thin smile. “You’re a smart man and quite skilled, I would think. Being a Guardian is a waste, don’t you think?”

I turn my head and lock onto his meaningful eyes, flashing a sardonic smile. “Do not forget. I’ve said that I have no wish to achieve anything.”

“The Golden Guardian is but a superficial title,” he pushes after a momentary pause. “I doubt you will get anywhere with it. Why not leave that behind and cross over to the righteous side?”

“Out of the people in this world, some want an empire, others want power, and there are yet others who want freedom,” I enunciate every syllable. “You want wealth and authority. I only want to be free. I’m going to have to say pass on that offer, Marshal.”

He scrutinizes me with squinted eyes. “What strong will. But allow me to say a few words.” He lets his arm drop and moves directly in front of me. “From all my years on the battlefield, and all the bows and swords I have seen, let me tell you, it’s the inflexible bows that lose their bowstrings first, and the stiffest blades that first get chips and cracks.” He focuses his piercing eyes onto me. “I am sure you are aware of this.”

I crack a thin smile. “Thanks, Marshal, but don’t you think you have more important matters than chatting here with me?”

He falters and then laughs. “You are straightforward all right, Guardian. No one has dared to speak in such a manner to me since I came to the capital, not even Minister Han Jun.”

I turn around. “My uncle is my uncle. I am myself.”

He bows his head in contemplation before looking back up. “You’re right. We should live a fulfilling life. But perhaps you should also consider just what the likelihood is that an egg can stay intact in a nest that is being flipped over.”

He smirks and opens his arms wide. “You cannot deny this is a world of chaos we are in.”

I nod after much debate and stay quiet. His eyes twinkle. “Only the strong get to decide their fate in a chaotic world. Not to mention, the secret haven that you speak of does not exist. There could not possibly be one when the country itself is in danger. You cannot leave it all behind as an army man of Great Rui.”

Words fail me. I feel utterly powerless all of a sudden. Everything he has said makes perfect sense. He gazes at me with a meaningful smile. Not wanting to continue the conversation, I turn to leave.

I've taken a few steps when he calls out to me. "You're very interesting, Guardian Han."

I stop and look back with a smile. "Marshal Heng, the one who says so is interesting himself."



According to Great Rui customs, the deceased emperor's casket stays in the palace for nearly one month. Funeral services and ceremonies are performed during this period. The heir, the royal family, officials, soldiers and commoners must wear mourning attire for twenty seven days, ceasing all entertainment and marriages. For nearly one month, the emperor's casket has been staying in Tai Qing Palace but things have gotten busy in the palace even before the emperor has been properly buried.

The empress dowager has summoned Duchess Yu Qing and Duchess Qi Huai to bring their sons, Mu De the Eldest and Duke of Yan Ning, respectively, into the palace. It looks as if she's going to pick one out of the two to be the new emperor but then again, it might be the case that whoever gets chosen would just become a puppet, just like Pei Yuan predicted.

Some people support Mu De the Eldest while others support Duke of Yan Ning. Surprisingly, Uncle remains silent; Heng Ziyu chooses to stand and watch on the side on account of being a martial official; Xie Yun refrains from commenting. Without any of the powerful officials' remarks, the issue of naming a new heir has been postponed again and again.

One day, it suddenly occurs to me that the empress dowager still has my pendant. I had left in such a hurry that day that I forgot to ask for it back and I think she forgot about it too. She blinked her eyes a little the next time she saw me and never brought it up.

Argh. Seriously, Empress Dowager? You could get anything in the world you wanted and you want my pendant? Grrr. It's the only thing I can remember my parents by and I've had it ever since I could remember. I really don't want to be a thief in my own house, stealing my own property.

I rant in my head as I help a soldier clean swords. He looks only about eighteen or nineteen and he's excited and beaming like the sun. I rap him hard on the head. "Hey dumbass. What the hell are ya smiling for? Are you tryin' to get yourself killed for disrespecting the crown?"

He scratches his head and frowns. "But I get to marry Xuanlan when the new emperor ascends the throne. I just can't help it."

"Well," I continue after a pause, "can't you keep it to a minimum? I reckon your jaw's gonna fall off at this rate."

He pouts and puts his back into scrubbing. Out of nowhere, he looks back up and scoots over to me. "Sir, how come you aren't married yet?"

I drop my gaze for a while before hitting him again. “Mind your own shit.”

But he doesn’t give up. “But sir, you’re one good-lookin’ fellow. Don’t you have anyone you’re seeing?”

I really, really do not want to think about this. One is because there is a ton of other stuff to fret about lately, and two, only one thing comes to mind when it comes to this topic. I can only think of that one person.

The memories break through the gates and gradually well out. The more I think the more depressed I get. The more I think the worse I feel. So I won’t think about it. Simple.

I might say so but I can’t help myself. How is he? Is he still barking at people for no reason other than his temper? Is he still stubborn about drinking medicine when he’s sick and getting mad at Xiao Qinyun? He always calls her a baby but he’s pretty childish himself.

Brushing off the concern of others, always carrying all the weight on his own—doesn’t he know that even the strongest person will get fatigued sooner or later?

I don’t like this me, the me that would feel a sting in the nose when I think of him.

I’ve already made my choice, so why can’t I seem to forget about him?

Fragmented thoughts flutter past. His warmth. His gaze. His strong embrace. And...and his pledge, his promise:

‘I like you and I’ll protect you. I won’t let another nightmare haunt you when you’re in my arms.’

Every single word seems to have been uttered just yesterday.

I scoff at myself, ridiculing:

You were never this wishy-washy before. But nowadays, whenever you stop his phantom would appear in your mind and stay there.

Could it be that you’ve fallen for him? For someone who was never meant to be.

For an enemy of Great Rui, someone who very well could annihilate Great Rui.

But this someone has been stored in the most discreet crevice in your heart and you can’t seem to let go of it. Han Xin, oh, Han Xin, you have left now but your heart—it appears you have left your heart behind.

The oblivious soldier is still bugging me. I roar abruptly. “I swear, if you don’t get all this shit cleaned today, I’m gonna take away your holiday. Let’s see you get married then!”

He freezes, not understanding why I suddenly became furious. I don’t bother explaining either. Dumping whatever I have in my hands, I leave out the door.

I run into Uncle immediately when I walk out. He’s wearing his Rank One uniform and a tired expression. He nods to me. “Follow me.”

The crimson red doors, walls, windows and pillars in the hall have all been covered with white cloth. Even the sixty-four glazed lamps are white. The usual magnificent red platform has been reduced to a pathetic state. Emperor Wen’s temporary memorial plaque has been placed on the head altar and his casket rests in the middle on it. Who knows where the crying concubines and

maids have gone. There is only that young emperor, lying all by himself in a cold coffin, waiting to be sent down to the lightless royal hills.

After a person dies and becomes a handful of dirt, do all the love, hate, favours and debts of a lifetime just disappear as well?

Uncle nods a little. "Go pay your respects to the Former Emperor."

I do as he says, kneeling down properly after I plant the incense down.

Emperor Wen was always lonely. Even though he owned all the land of the realm, even though he was the supreme ruler, even though he had a harem of concubines, he was always by himself. Maybe it's really not that easy to find another person whom you can share your heart and life with in this world.

I think of him. I think of the times.

"Han Xin, I have something to ask you and I want you to answer me honestly."

I get up and nod in agreement. He sweeps over my face and then the entire funeral hall with darkening eyes before finally asking. "All these years, have you ever hated your uncle?"

I'm taken back by his unusually serious behaviour. Icy frost coats his face as he stares steadily at me.

"So, you really do hate me, huh?" He croaks.

Slowly I take a step back while keeping my eyes on him. I can't begin to describe my thoughts. What's going on this time? Why would Uncle say such a strange thing? Involuntarily, I glance over to Emperor Wen's plaque. Could it be that Uncle has gone mad along with Emperor Wen?

A freezing gust blows past, the white sheets billowing along like levitating ghosts. I bite on my lips and gradually turn my head back to face Uncle's eerie expression.

Do I? Or do I not?

The memories of my youth come rushing: a child under someone else's roof, lonely with no one to depend on, alone to face the ridicule and bullying of his older cousins and the neglect of the servants, only knowing the comforts of food and substance but never of love or care.

Recalling the bygone only makes me feel miserable and unwilling to speak any further. I finally regain my composure after a moment's efforts. "I choose to not answer that question, Uncle."

He stays standing, motionless, watching me quietly, and finally breaks into a sorrowful smile. "You really are like your mother. She had a fair appearance but an intense personality, always clear on her feelings. You're the same. You hate me and you won't say the opposite."

A spasm runs through my chest as I hear him talking about Mother—mother, the closest person one could have, whom I've never even seen, not even through a portrait. All I know about her is that she was the niece that the empress dowager adored, and the blood sister of Minister Han. That is all.

I hold his gaze, suppressing the anguish. "Yes. I never force lies out of my mouth."

He suddenly tilts his head back to study the white sheets billowing from the ceiling of the building while his shoulders are shaking.

“You’re a descendant of Han but not a son of.” He chuckles drily. “After all, his blood is running through your veins.”

It doesn’t take a genius to know who *he* is. Uncle is talking about my father. Just what kind of person was my father? He has always been omitted on purpose, tucked into the darkness, never to see light.

“How many years has it been since I took you into my home? I have always hoped. Hoped that you would never find out.” He cracks a melancholic smile. “I guess my sister also did, but...she was wrong. Oh, so utterly wrong!”

I have to bite down hard to stop myself from running away.

He watches me with depressed eyes. “I’ve regretted it for twelve years, no, twenty years more like it!”

An odd emotion arises out of nowhere as I watch his aging complexion.

“She had always thought keeping you alive would be the best but it seems it might just be cruel for you now.”

A fire starts burning in my chest, smoking my heart. My head starts aching immensely as if something is circling around trying to break out or a knife is stirring up my insides. The keen blade slices over every inch as though to cut me apart. I scurry backwards, hitting the ice cold wall, and hold my head close as tremors run through me.

Ahh! It hurts so much!

He remains silent for a long time before turning away to face the door with a dazed expression as he looks to the distance as though he is reminiscing about someone or something of the past long gone.

The wind howls and the sheets swell up from all directions.

“There’s no use hiding it. What’s going to come will come.” He turns back around to me with a dejected smile full of pain.

I keep hugging my head while staring at him like a stranger.

He strides forth, grabs me by the wrist with frightening strength, dragging me out of the hall.

“Where’re we going?!”

“Yong An Palace!”

¹⁰³ The night is separated into five watches of two hours each to organize night patrol in the royal palace. The First Watch is 7 o’clock to 9 o’clock pm, and the Fourth Watch is 1 o’clock to 3 o’clock am.

¹⁰⁴ This is a Han tradition. For men this happened at age twenty. See below for picture.

¹⁰⁵ This name is a euphemism for grave. The royal family had land specifically meant for burial and it was usually in a mountain to prevent grave robbers.

¹⁰⁶ It is believed that you get to be different organisms in the next life depending on how you did in this life. To be reincarnated as a human is thought to be one of the best outcomes.

¹⁰⁷ 文 (*wen2*), literature, writing.

XXII: Remorse of Yone

There was a marriage that shook the entire country two decades ago.

Lin Shaoyan, Duke Zhao Rui, who had just come home victorious from the north, took Han Jinrong, daughter of an affluent family in the capital, as his wife. He was a legendary hero and she was a stunning beauty. Everyone from the elite to the commoners applauded the marriage. ‘It was a perfect match made in heaven,’ they said.

One year following the marriage, Duchess Zhao Rui bore a son.

The boy was born at first light. The duke was delighted and named his son after this¹⁰⁸. When the boy came into this world crying, a majestic rainbow shot across the sky, the room filled with an unusual aroma and purple clouds¹⁰⁹ floated around the manor. There were even witnesses outside the manor who saw a faint golden dragon circling high above the clouds. On the boy’s one month celebration, the duke’s good friend, the esteemed monk Rujing, attended and when he saw the boy who was still being swaddled, he gasped in surprise: ‘Tis the face of a king!’

Great Rui customs do not give too much importance to a child’s maternal bloodline. The duke was the younger brother of Emperor Wen’s father, Emperor Mu. No one had objections that he took the Empress’ niece as his wife.

Seven years later, Emperor Mu departed from this life. Emperor Wen ascended the throne and the empress was given the title of Empress Dowager in respect. The emperor was still young and the empress dowager sat in during morning courts, shifting the power away from the Lin clan to the maternal relatives. Duke Zhao Rui had led many battles, and as a noble royalty he was not pleased with another family holding power. Also, considering the auspicious signs regarding his son’s birth, he did not want to obey a woman and a child. Thus, with ‘ridding the emperor of evil’ as his slogan, he started a revolt from his enfeoffment, the County of Feng Hai.

Under the leadership of the Han family, the officials were furious when they caught wind of this and branded the duke a traitor. The empress dowager immediately put troops into combat to suppress the rebellion and the conflict quickly escalated. The duke was betrayed by his own clan and his campaign fell apart. In the end, he committed suicide out of indignation and the duchess and the boy were lost amidst the battle, nowhere to be found.

The battle lasted for a year. Countless lost their homes. Crops were left unharvested. The court suffered greatly and the country was in a much weaker state than before. The empress dowager began to strip the lords of their power in the name of preventing another rebellion. The royal family of Lin fell into despair, no longer glorious as before. The golden ages had left, never to return.

The court historians are always able to erase the gruesome details with their skilled brushes, the blood and the tempest all becoming a line or two of neat ink.

This is the story the world knows, but what they do not know is that a storm just as violent blew through the magnificent royal city that so few could ever lay eyes on.

Wraiths working for the Han family brought back the duchess and the boy from the battlefield. The duchess knelt before the empress dowager with tears running down her face, begging for the boy's life to be spared. Great Rui's laws stated that the family of rebels was treated equally as the rebel, thus the empress dowager refused. With nothing else left, the Duchess ended her own life, exchanging it for the boy's. The boy was eight years old at the time. Terrified by the blood flowing across the floor, he turned around and ran.

The entrance of Yong An Palace was not guarded. The boy raced towards the white steps in front of the palace. He missed a step, wobbled, and fell head first down the steps. When an attendant picked him up, the boy's face was as pale as a ghost, lips a sickly green while scarlet trickled from his nose. The court doctors did all they could and the boy miraculously woke up after two days, but he had lost all his memory and did not recognize anybody.

The son of Duke Zhao Rui has not been seen ever since.



I'm sitting in a chair carved with floral patterns. The smell of agarwood fills my nostrils, making me feel really sick. The faces of the empress dowager and Uncle shift back and forth as though covered by a thick fog. Amidst the blackness, I can't see or hear anything; amidst the spinning world, I only feel the stinging pain coming from my head.

All of my strength seems to have been drained out and all my blood rushes down towards the ground, the chilly wind wiggling into my body from all around.

Sweat is rolling down my back and damping my undershirt. I try to wipe away the beads on my forehead but I find that I can't even move my fingers.

I can kind of see Uncle's mouth open and close through the daze. His voice is muffled. I can make out some words but not many. The empress dowager towers on her throne in the background, watching with arcane eyes.

I can almost picture the horse hooves whipping past me like raindrops while a woman is holding me tight, trying her best to evade harm. The crimson world is filled with neighs of warhorses, wails of those on the brink of death and the clanging of weapons. The woman scampers

across the rugged ground with me buried in her arms. Jewelry falls from her hair, branches claw through her clothes and dirt coats her shoes but she is still running for her life to an unknown destination.

A dagger drops to the ground and the woman falls limp. She turns her head to look at me from the ground. Her face is pale and blood keeps gushing out from her warm smile. She beckons at me with shaking hands. Her lips are moving slowly, seeming to form words. Frightened, I stare at them carefully with wide-eyes. She's crying but is still beautiful beyond description.

'My dear, you must live on for Mom and your father. Mom is going to die soon. You're going to be by yourself in this world now.'

Then the world does a flip, my head planting on the hard ground. The rusty smell of blood rushes forth and people start screaming around me.

I rip my head away, chest rising and falling violently, and try to suppress my raging emotions.

Finally, Uncle's voice has stopped. I look up. He's been standing in front of me, watching, as though to inquire 'Do you understand?'

I wipe my moist eyes, cracking a smile. I end up squeezing out of my mouth, "What a fucking lame story. I've heard its likes at least a million times."

I feel a sting on my cheek before I even finish speaking. Uncle has steam coming out of his ears as he barks, "You wretched beast! Your mother died for nothing!"

My cheek is burning but no tears are coming out. I close my eyes, quivering.

Wretched beast?

For twelve years, I went from highborn nobility to an orphan living under someone's roof while being lied to and neglected, and never got to see my parents.

I suppose all parents want their children to be better off than them, but I had never thought that my parents had put such efforts into keeping me alive through the perilous situation.

I look around me. The exquisitely carved beams, picturesque pillars and the golden glory only make me feel an overwhelming loneliness and misery that seems to bury me alive.

I just want to find a place where I can be alone right now and cry my eyes out.

Dejectedly, I turn my head over to Uncle who is looking rueful and the empress dowager with her red, swollen eyes, silently fixing her makeup with a silk handkerchief.

I'm in so much agony, yet I crack a smile. "If I may ask the empress dowager, why did You not just keep me in the dark? You had been for twelve years, why tell me this here and now?"

Slowly, she turns to look at me with a wry smile. "You think I wanted to spare you? If your mother hadn't given up her own life for yours, you would be with your traitor of a father now!"

I shoot up and glare at her defiantly. "Please don't disgrace my father like that!"

Uncle gets in between us, yelling at me, "Sit down! This isn't your place to speak!" Then he turns to her. "We should not delay things any further, Aunt. Let's not get caught up in this argument."

She leans over and takes something out from a box beside her. My heart skips a beat when I see it. It's my jade pendant.

“Han Xin, oh no, I should call you Lin Xin.” She smiles coldly, making chills run down my back. “The spot of Lin Xin has never been crossed out from the royal family tree, you know.”

Steadily, I take a step back, all my blood rushing back into my head.

“Now that Emperor Wen has left, everyone only knows about Mu De the Eldest and Duke Yan Ning but who could ever fathom that there is someone in the royal family who is even more closely related by blood alive right now!”

She raises her brows, enunciating. “And you, Lin Xin, are that person!”

She looks at me as if to bore a hole in me while a satisfied smile lingers on her lips.

I don’t know what the hell she’s smiling for. Did I miss the joke? I’m the son of a traitor. Even if I have royal blood in me, I’m still a condemned sinner.

Uncle remains silent as if all this has nothing to do with him. The empress dowager suddenly stands up and steps down from her throne, the white train of her dress dragging on the floor, making her steps a bit clumsy. She draws near and reaches out her fingers, the pointy nails drawing an arc in the air to end up about an inch away from my face.

“Your face looks just like your dad’s. No one would ever deny the fact that this is Duke Zhao Rui’s son if they saw this face. Plus,” her tone suddenly changes. She raises her left hand and an emerald green pendant swings from it.

“Twin jade panlong carved in relief. There were only two of these in this world. Emperor Mu had one and Duke Zhao Rui had the other one. Who could possibly object?”

I start shaking. No, impossible. No way.

She laughs in a soothing voice while pulling a creepy smile. “All those *signs* when you were born....”

I take a deep breath, holding my fists tight. “May I implore Your Graciousness to return my jade pendant to me?”

She edges closer, staring me down. “And what are you going to do if I don’t?”

I clench my jaw to restrain myself. “I do not ask for much; I do not have any ambitions. I only implore Your Graciousness to return the jade pendant, and then I will leave and never come back.”

“If it were not for you,” she spits, “Jinrong wouldn’t have wound up dead! And I still had to raise you, worrying about your future for you! Your Uncle not only had to worry about raising you, but he had to make sure no one found out about your past!”

“Stop it!” At last, I can’t hold in my urge to scream. “If everything you’ve done for the past twelve years was for me, then I’d rather you didn’t!”

The gleam starts to fade from Uncle’s eyes.

The empress dowager suddenly throws back her head in insane laughter. “The rainbow in the sky; the aroma in the room; the purple clouds in midair; the golden dragon in flight—it has been twelve years but fate is fate.”

It hits me what she’s referring to. Cold sweat breaks out once more, chilling me to the core. I try to bear with it as my body cools down.

No. It absolutely cannot be!

"If I had known things would be like this, I would have sent you down to meet your dad!" She hisses viciously through her clenched jaw. "Auspicious signs? I don't buy it. You are just the same as your dad, never knowing to take the easier route!"

Slowly, I approach her, smiling. "It's not too late now, Great Auntie. You can still kill me now if you want."

Uncle looks up in surprise. "You!"

"It wouldn't matter. I'm still Han right now. If you wanted to kill me, it would be easier than killing an ant." I look straight at her and remark emotionlessly. "A child is much easier to control than me."

She watches me steadily as the ire dissipates in her eyes.

"Too bad." I take a glimpse out the door. "If you really were a wicked person then you would've killed me twelve years ago and none of this would have happened."

She turns away from me with her back to me, her frame shaking slightly, no longer venomous. "I had held you myself when you were born. If only that adorable baby never grew up."

"But you have grown your wings and can fly alone now. You don't listen to us anymore." Uncle starts talking. "I asked you if you hated me and you didn't even want to answer me."

I keep holding it in and do not make a sound.

Do I hate him? Do I not?

They should be my closest family after my parents, but they are the ones I should hate the most.

The empress dowager turns back around, her comportment regained. It's a frightening expression. It's very woeful but forbidding at the same time.

I can't even begin to count the number of times she's scolded me throughout the years but not once have I ever been this afraid.

If she asks *that question*, I am absolutely not going to say yes.

Over my dead body!

"You could not begin to fathom the difficulties the Han clan have had to go through for the glory that you see. Both your uncle and I come from a prestigious background, but we must shoulder our responsibilities for the clan. *We must accept our fate.*" She gazes at me, a bit forlorn and distracted but also very determined and relentless. "And the same goes for you! There is no escape!"



My mind starts to wander as I walk stiffly behind Uncle, my hands and feet cold, body stiff, out of Yong An Palace, out of the royal city and towards the Minister's Mansion.

My mind is blank and drowsy. A puzzling fog spreads endlessly before my eyes. I can't see a thing; I can't hold on to anything.

We have made some distance already but her words are still resonating in my ears. Just five words have flipped my world upside down, leaving me at a loss.

The royal palace and the holy throne would be the biggest irony for me.

Who would have guessed that the good-for-nothing who used to hang around on the streets was a royal descendant?

My heart is a desolate moor. I can no longer hold back the tears; they're going to overflow any second now.

I don't know how I got back to the mansion. The familiar yard seems foreign. I have the feeling that this isn't my home and that my home is somewhere else.

"Go in." Uncle enters without looking back.

We bump into Master Liao in front of the study. He looks calm as he moves to the side. "Master Han."

Uncle nods before looking back at me. "Look on the bright side, Xin." Then he goes into his study, sighing, not sparing me another glance.

I don't know what happened after, but by the time I realise, Master Liao has been sitting quietly beside me without a word for quite some time.

"Let it out if you want." He looks steadily at me. "Men do not shed tears unless they are truly hurt."

I turn to look at him, letting out a soft utterance. "Aren't you gonna ask me what the problem is?"

He replies, "You'd feel better if you told someone, but some things are better left unsaid."

I look up at him curiously.

"Once upon a time, I was in despair, too. I felt like the sky was collapsing in on me. It took me a very long time to get back on my feet again."

"Because there were more important things for me to do." He claps my shoulder. "There isn't anything in the world you can't get over."

The evening wind brushes past. I close my eyes and tilt my head back, muttering. "I don't want this. I want my own life."

He gets up. "I can only accompany you so far. You must solve your own problems."

I finally ask after much contemplation, "Master? If suddenly one day you were forced to shoulder responsibilities that aren't yours, what would you do?"

He falters but smiles at me. "If there are responsibilities for you to carry, then there must be a just reason for you to do so."

He walks farther and farther away but suddenly turns around. His eyes are hidden in the shadows, his face stern. "Han Xin," he reminds me lowly. "Don't run anymore. Sometimes, running away doesn't solve anything."

Hurriedly, I turn around but he has already disappeared into the far side of the gallery.

The evening breeze brings along the cold and humidity, slowly corroding my body. I curl into a ball, pressing my head against my knees. The wind seeps through my clothes, almost freezing me all over, but what's colder is my heart.

I close my eyes. I just want to go to sleep and never wake up.

For some reason I think of him, the person I've left for some time.

His embrace wouldn't be this cold, would it?

I chuckle drily. I'm so stupid. I almost had warmth in my grasp but I pushed it away myself. I had happiness within my reach but I ran from it like a disease. Why is it that I only know to appreciate it after I've lost it?

One by one, teardrops hit the ground.

How are you, Murong Yu? What are you up to? I really miss you. If only I were still by your side.

Is all this your punishment for me?

I don't want that position at the top. I don't want to be the emperor that rules over the world. I just want to live my own life without any restraints.

What would you do if you were here? Laugh at me? Or would you comfort me?

I reach up to my neck only to find that nothing's there. The empress dowager took mine but his is still in my room. A thought flashes across my mind. I bite on my lips for a moment before I shoot up.

Why stay here if I don't want to? I've already decided to say no so I should go the whole way!

I rush back to my room and pack my clothes and money in a bundle. I put the pendant and *xiao* in it too. Taking a look around the room before turning away, I leave out the door without a second thought.

I'm extremely familiar with the mansion. The security is not that good. I steer clear of the servants and sneak to the back door. I push on it to find that it's locked but I get it to open after playing with it a little.

Almost there. I'm almost there. I take another glimpse at the place I've lived in for twelve years and leave in brisk steps.

There are still lots of people on the streets. I slip into the crowd, contemplating where it is I should go. The city gates are probably going to close soon. They won't be able to catch me even if they tried as long as I get out of here before the gates close.

With that in mind, I take a turn at a small alley heading south towards Chang Qing¹¹⁰ Road. Past Chang Qing Road is the Xuan Ping Gates. It's fair sailing once I get past those gates.

Chang Qing Road, huh. It sounds familiar. It seems to be.... The Manor of Duke Zhao Rui used to be here!

Despite the little time that is left, I make up my mind and do a sharp turn towards the manor.

I'm afraid I won't ever come back if I leave this time. I'll just go see it once, just once.

The further I walk the darker the path gets. At the end of it I see a large, gloomy shadow slumbering in the night. The boisterous crowd and flickering flames from behind make it seem all the more desolate and lonesome.

The placard¹¹¹ above the manor doors has long disappeared. The red doors are spotty with rust. I walk up the steps and push ever so gently on the doors. They open with a loud creak.

I don't think I can ever forget about what I see when they open: layers upon layers of leaves are piled on the ground releasing a foul, rotting odour; the paper on the windows is torn and ripped, leaving the bare frames clattering in the wind; weeds are growing wildly on the top of the walls and in between the shingles; green foxtail has grown about half a *chi* tall in the yard and is swaying in the evening breeze. The house is like a tired, old man taking his last, painstaking breaths.

Dust floats into my eyes and in that moment of blurriness, the dam in my head lifts open and an endless wave of memories come rushing forth.

I meander around, from the lobby to the inner hall. The short distance takes much effort and seems as long as a lifetime.

There... Mom and Dad used to read poetry and paint there.

There... I used to play and have fun there.

There....

And over there....

This is my home. I still remember even though I've been gone for twelve years. Every bit of it was already engraved in my head long ago.

My eyes wander around without aim, trying to see everything there is to see in the manor but a mist obscures my vision.

The Minister's Mansion and the duke's Manor are only separated by a few street blocks, yet it has taken me twelve long years to find my way back home.

My knees buckle and they hit the cold, hard ground in the Manor's yard. I place my forehead on the ice cold ground, tears finally streaming down.

Dad, Mom, I haven't been a good son. How could I have lived blindly for twelve years not being able to remember you?

I'm shuddering as my sobs finally become audible.

'Men do not shed tears unless they are truly hurt.'

I'm sorry it took me so long to come home.

I didn't know my own name, didn't know my parents. I didn't try hard enough and only fooled around. I'm sorry for not letting you rest in peace down there.

The stark world sends down bitter wind to dig under my clothes, making me feel cold to the bone.

Dad, I understand how you must have felt but I don't desire glory and power. I just want to be normal.

Don't be disappointed in me, please. I don't want to accept the fate they speak of. Everyone has their own aspirations; it shouldn't be forced.

I kowtow, hitting the ground hard. I stay in that position for a long time while choking on my sobs. Finally, I get up and take a look around.

Dad, Mom, farewell.

I head towards the front door. I've taken no more than a few steps when a strange gust of air hits me. My heart skips a beat and I leap off the steps, eyes darting around warily.

"Young Master, please return with us. Master Han is still waiting," says a low voice through the wind.

I clench my jaw to suppress my jitters. It's them—they've finally come.

"And what're you gonna do if I don't go back?"

"We have orders from Master Han to retrieve Young Master through physical means if necessary." A few shadows rapidly draw near with the wind.

Panicking, I quickly back away only to see the rooftops lined with shadowy figures. I catch a glimpse of one from the corner of my eye. The person bursts into action, striking towards my neck with his palm.

I tilt my head, evading his attack, and hit him hard on his chest with the back of my hand. He slides back half a step and looks at me cautiously.

"I don't wanna have to fight you," I warn. "Don't make me."

"Young Master, 'a wise man submits to circumstances'. Don't push it."

I brace myself as I shift into a fighting stance. "Then I'll be a foolish man today."

Flames start flickering and sporadic footsteps echo from beyond the door. Both he and I are startled. He picks his feet up and springs into the darkness. In that moment, all the figures disappear without a trace.

The footsteps stop outside the door. One person runs up the steps facing me, the blazing flames behind him cloaking his face, the voice very familiar.

"The empress dowager summons Han Xin to the royal palace!"

¹⁰⁸ 昕(*xin1*), literally 'the period of time directly before sunrise.'

¹⁰⁹ Purple clouds are thought of as an auspicious sign. It is not necessarily purple, but is most likely a figure of speech. Normally, gods are said to travel upon purple clouds.

¹¹⁰ 長(*chang2*) 慶(*qing4*), literally 'long prosperity.'

¹¹¹ Normally made of hardwood, a placard was meant to be the identifier of the building, almost like an address. Sometimes placards exist purely for decorative purposes and are often calligraphy. See below for picture.

XXIII: Ascension

Before me lie the portraits of every emperor of Great Rui. They are seated on the throne, lips pursed, wearing the Twelve Ornament Regalia¹¹² of the Black Flying Dragon and crowned with the Pearl Crown¹¹³ while looking down with stony, emotionless eyes. Thin, long candles and incense burn quietly on the altar. Faint wisps of dark smoke draw spirals in the air. Grave candles flicker eerily on my two sides like wandering ghosts.

Chong Wen¹¹⁴ Palace is the place where the portraits of the Great Rui emperors are stored and is an extremely sacred place of the entire palace. No one can enter without permission therefore it's as quiet as hell itself.

The sombre expressions of the emperors make me uneasy. The past seems to be embedded within those thin pieces of paper, telling the heavy and bloody history of the Lin clan's path to power.

I stare dumbly at the dancing flames as if I have been disconnected from reality. My face is still stinging painfully from the slaps.

The empress dowager's pressing voice is still resonating by my ears: "You good-for-nothing! I just knew you would try to escape!"

I was stopped by her personal guards at the manor and then brought back to Yong An Palace in shackles.

"You knave!" was what greeted me when I stepped in.

Then she slapped me right across the face. My ears rang and my face started burning, her nails having made bloody streaks on my cheeks.

Immediately, I looked up only to see her stormy expression and before I knew it she slapped me again. "You useless coward!"

I didn't speak or move and just let her hit me and yell at me.

Finally, she got tired and backed away to her throne, panting while scrutinizing me.

"I will ask you one more time. Yes or no?"

"I refuse."

"You whoreson! Good-for-nothing!"

She picked up a teacup from the table and hurled it at me. I tilted my head and it brushed past my cheek, crashing into the ground, shattering into a million pieces.

“Do you not have any ambition whatsoever?!”

I spoke flatly. “We all have our aspirations, and not even You, Your Graciousness, can alter them.”

“So you are telling **me** you don’t want to be the ruler, and you don’t want to be a son of the rich?” She glared at me. “You only want to be a peasant?”

I dropped on my knees. “Precisely, Your Graciousness. I do not desire wealth or power. I beg that You grant me a way out.”

Her eyes were icy and full of emotional turmoil like a blizzard. The hall was dead silent.

After a while, she got up, regaining her previous posture of a high-class noble lady. She walked up to me, her long sleeves dangling, swinging before my eyes.

Suddenly, she smiled, her cold forty year-old complexion still brilliant. “**I** suppose you won’t be needing this if you were a peasant!” Saying this, she raised her arm. I caught on to what she was trying to do and lunged forward, grabbing her legs. “No, Empress Dowager, don’t!”

In her hand was none other than the emerald green twin panlong.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to be a peasant?” She looked down at me with a cruel smirk. “A peasant would not have a panlong pendant, now would they? **I** am only thinking on your behalf.”

I held onto her legs, barely keeping myself up while my body started cooling down.

“But then again,” she raised the pendant up, studying it. “**I** don’t have to break it. The son of Duke Zhao Rui has been missing for so many years that no one would know who he is.”

I stared straight at her with nothing else to say. She looked like a stranger to me.

“If you don’t want to be the son of Duke Zhao Rui, there will be plenty of others who do. Han Xin, did you really think you could best **me**?”

She tipped her head back gracefully, smiling. “Duke Zhao Rui was a legendary hero yet his son is a lowlife who only wants to be a peasant!” Then she kicked me away with a look of disdain. “**My** niece died for nothing, too. **I** bet she never thought her son would be such a wimp.”

“Your Graciousness,” I crawled up from the ground, flashing a wry smile. “You’re leaving me no choice here.”

Turning away, she ignored me and I watched her thin, white figure walk towards the hall doors. “Guards! Escort Han Xin to Chong Wen Palace!”

As the doors of Chong Wen Palace were closing, I saw her standing outside. Her face was pale and the vermilion bindi only made her look all the more grave.

“Han Xin, **I** am going to give you one day’s time!”

I have no idea what time it is now. Neither do I know how long I’ve been in here. I peer to the side to see little sparks sprouting from the candle before Emperor Shun’s portrait at the far end. Only then do I have a sense of time.

I’m only able to sort everything out after I’ve calmed down.

The act of choosing me, the son of a traitor, to be heir over the other two proper sons reeks of her and Uncle's long-term calculations.

The Han clan has held control of the court for so long. If one of those two kids were to become emperor, then it would still be the maternal relatives who are in control and under the current weakening state, there will surely be an uproar across the nation.

I'm just an incompetent rich kid who knows nothing—everyone knows this. If I became emperor, it would shut everyone up and I'd be easy to control.

Those eyeing the throne could easily take it from a juvenile emperor after amassing the right amount of power. If it were a mature successor, the conspirator wouldn't act so hastily in fear of being shamed by the people¹¹⁵.

And as long as the emperor is of adult age, even if he were a puppet, the crime of leading the country into annihilation would not go to them.

I hug my knees, chuckling drily, a complicated feeling filling my chest.

Suddenly, this all seems so ridiculous and pathetic that tears start streaming down my face.

I just wanted to be left out. All I wanted was to be normal, to live my own life. But things just happened. My past gets uncovered and I get pushed down a path I loathe.

I didn't want to get involved in their foul and corrupt political fight but now I've become a pawn in the empress dowager's power game; I didn't want any so-called glory or authority but now I'm being forced to become the supreme ruler.

The freedom that I have been yearning for has become the most ironic ridicule.

I lower my head, too afraid to look anymore.

The empress dowager had asked me if I had the blood and pride of a royalty and I had shaken my head. I don't know. I really don't know. Royalty is a term that seems so far, so high above me. I've long forgotten what pride is and what nobility is after twelve years of lies and deceptions. The cowardice of the royal family has been accumulating for so long and now they want the son of a traitor to sustain the royal pride and valour? It would be less offensive if they slapped every member of the royal family across the face.

I glance over every single portrait of the emperors—Emperor Shun, arrogant and lordly; Emperor Cheng, reserved and resolute; Emperor Ming, majestic and spirited; Emperor Mu, sophisticated and charming; finally, Emperor Wen's miserable smile right before departing this life.

What if.... What would my destiny be if I really became emperor?

Would I expand our territories like Emperor Shun did? Would I lead our country to an era of prosperity like Emperor Cheng did? Would I be talented in the arts as Emperor Mu was? Or would I only end up as a puppet and die with regrets like Emperor Wen did?

Or maybe I would become the sinner of Great Rui when the country falls and get shamed on for generations to come?

I stare at the jumping flames without a word.

Father, what was it that made you so determined to start a rebellion? Was it for your own desires? Or was it really to maintain the pride and valour of the royal blood, to protect the name of the royal family?

Your son isn't as courageous as you. He's only thinking about himself when the country is suffering and the royal family is weak.

Could you please tell him what to do?

The candlelight before me starts to fade out and the blood-strewn battlefield materialises.

Soldiers are moaning beneath horse hooves, crying out in pain. Keen metal pierces through flesh with a muffled sound. Thick blood snakes out, slowly soaking through the soil. Hellfire has engulfed the villages and fields and is reaching for the sky. Widows and orphans let out heartrending weeps while the old and young starve or freeze to death. Corpses line the streets and wild beasts are gnawing away at them. What was originally a home where people worked and lived just a moment ago has become a living hell.

I shut my eyes, too scared to think any further of the scenes that appeared before me.

If the day really comes when the Yan army storms through the walls, then the capital will become a living hell, the men slaughtered, the women assaulted, the entire country groaning in pain beneath the Yan cavalry.

'Twelve years. If only he had succeeded twelve years ago, Great Rui wouldn't be what it is today....'

'Great Rui's establishment was based on scholarship; many of the royals are scholars. But only him, only he was skilled in martial arts, if only he was the emperor now, if only....'

I finally understand what Duke Yu Qing was wishing for before passing away.

Father has passed away. I'm his son so I have to shoulder everything. Is this really my so-called fate?

The sorry state of Great Rui has made me understand Father's choice.

Even though he knew there probably would be no turning back from the bottomless pit, he pushed onward without hesitation. And Mother wasn't afraid: she was right behind him no matter where he was headed, even if it were Armageddon.

Father, even though he did not succeed, had defended the dignity of the royal family.

Before I know it, my face has become wet with tears.

Father, if you were here, Father, you would want me to brace the tidal waves and take control over the empire without a second thought even if there was a way out.

I smile in self-pity as teardrops slip out of my eyes.

Is this my fate?

Inside the still inner hall, I curl up into a ball with my back against Emperor Shun's portrait and stay there quietly. I've gone through so many challenges and near-death experiences but this time I won't be able to make it.

Time slips past in the stillness and I drift to sleep.

In my dream, there are no parents, no friends, no relatives, only me and myself.

Suddenly, I'm being shaken by someone. Dazedly, I blink my eyes. I look at the person but my mind is hazy and I can't recognize who it is.

Maid Xiu is kneeling in front of me with a disconcerted look. Her eyes redden before she gets a word out. I bite on my lip as I gaze at her worried complexion and my eyes start to burn and my vision blurs.

She reaches out with shaking hands to touch the side of my head. "I have been waiting for this day to come."

"Maid Xiu." I pull my legs in, laying my head on my knees. I force a smile as I look at her at an angle. "You've always known, haven't you?"

She bites on her lips and tears well up in her eyes. "The duke and duchess can finally rest in peace now."

Tears flow down my cheeks. She reaches out tenderly and wipes them away for me. "You liked to cry when you were young. Are you still going to cry now that you're going to be the emperor?"

I chuckle. "Why must you all make me do this?"

She stays quiet for a while as her tears hit the polished tiles. "It is your destiny."

My destiny. My destiny, huh. I suddenly feel drained, my heart having plunged down a cliff.

Her tears keep flowing. "If you don't become emperor then how will the duke and duchess ever get their justice? Do you want the duke to be shamed as a sinner forever? When would he ever get his name cleared otherwise?"

My eyes feel so sore and my chest seems to be weighed down and suffocated by a boulder. The tears linger in my eyes, not making it out.

"When you were little," she recounts hollowly. "The duke and duchess often joked, saying our boy would be a legendary champion and conquer the world. The duke's biggest wish was for you to achieve the greatest and make your name known to the world!"

I can't form words as if I've been struck by lightning.

I have lived in ignorance for twelve years, not only ignorant of my parents but also going against their wishes.

She wraps her arms around me, bringing my head to her lap. She bends down as she smiles affectionately with teary eyes. A faint smell of wild ginger flowers¹¹⁶ wafts from her clothes. It smells just like Mother.

"When you were little, you loved to play. And when you got tired from playing you would lie on the duchess' lap like this so she couldn't do anything else. She often complained but she looked so happy."

"The duke taught you to read and martial arts but you always slacked off. The duke would try to punish you but you would go hide behind the duchess. He would get so frustrated but he couldn't do anything...."

"Springtime in April, they would take you out to the countryside...."

"You just loved boating in the summer and the duke and duchess would accompany you until late into the night...."

Out from her mouth come strings of stories, revealing the past and uncovering my deepest scars, and the bloody fragments come flying straight at me.

My eyes flicker restlessly as I gaze at the ceiling. "Is being emperor really that big of a deal?" I mumble.

Maid Xiu pats my back lovingly. "I've said it already. Only if you become emperor can you clear their names; only if you become emperor can you overlook this realm; only if you become emperor can you turn things around and rescue the nation."

Tears obscure my vision once more.

And this time, I finally understand.

My destiny never belonged to me. Never has, never will.

My parents died, leaving me as their only hope; the country is on the brink of destruction and disaster is about to strike, and I must shoulder everything. If I had to blame something, it would have to be the royal blood that flows through me. But how could I have chosen my own birth?

I let out a laugh of despair. It echoes in the empty hall. I laugh until tears come out. The founding emperor, Emperor Shun, scrutinizes me silently without a word.

That eight year old had no idea that life would be this unpredictable, that his life had been decided for him, and that no matter the challenges and trials he would face, he would one day ascend the throne.

'The rainbow in the sky; the aroma in the room; the purple clouds in midair; the golden dragon in flight.'

My entire life had already been set in stone by those twenty words.

I've never once felt before that the palace was this freezing cold and that it was this menacing and sinister.

In between the ornate beams and pillars, the splendid roofs and swaying curtains of Chong Wen Palace, I can almost glimpse the spirits of the emperors. They are rushing to step out of their portraits to stand before me. They are looking down at me, at this descendant of theirs, to see what I will choose. Will I accept my destiny and save the country or will I choose to be stubborn and let myself go?

Master Liao has always said in his teachings that the victor becomes king while the defeated becomes the sinner. Even the most glorious royal families could go extinct in an instant.

If I remain stubborn and unwilling to accept, then the empress dowager will be wary of my existence and make sure that I don't make it out of the royal city alive. I think a devious woman like her would be capable of doing that.

Slowly, I sit up straight and silently face Emperor Shun's portrait.

Ancestors of the Lin clan, is this your punishment for me?

The candle in front of him flickers, embers bursting forth, and suddenly goes out.

The sky has begun to whiten, casting the faint morning glow through the windows. Wordlessly, Maid Xiu gets up and drops on her knees behind me.

I speak through clipped lips. “Maid Xiu, it was the empress dowager’s idea for you to come, too, right?”

She quickly kowtows, pressing her forehead to the floor. “But the words were from the bottom of my heart!”

Footsteps disturb the stillness. There is more than one pair. Messy and sporadic, it holds within it the heavy scraping of boots and the clinking of armour and weapons. Maid Xiu looks up at me with fixed eyes.

Alas, they’ve come.

The doors are pushed open with a bang. An emotionless senior attendant who serves the empress dowager strides in and stops while many fully armed soldiers rush in from behind. Another attendant steps out from behind holding a cup of wine with his head bowed. I get up without a word and turn to face them.

The older attendant asks in a sharp voice. “Have you reached a decision?”

Tiny flakes of gold float in the amber wine. Gold flaked wine—the generous demise bestowed upon royalty. I glance at the cup and sneer. I’m so flattered.

Maid Xiu lets out a sorrowful weep as she lies on the floor quivering.

The attendant squints as he scrutinizes me. I scoff and knock the cup down. The amber wine splashes on the ground and the gold cup tumbles away. The soldiers immediately step forward and unsheathe their swords halfway.

“Eunuch,” I call out. “You are no longer needed.”

He lowers his head with a knowing smile and steps aside. A soldier who had been behind him strides forth with a bowed head, holding a scarlet tray, and bows down on one knee. They are all young, able-bodied men wearing bright red armour, a dark red cape and a helmet with red feathers. On the tray is a black Nine Ornament Regalia and a dragon soars within with its claws drawn. There is also a Nine Pearl Crown, the nine strings of pearls clinking against each other.

“May I implore that Your Majesty change into the ceremonial raiment? The empress dowager is waiting.” The attendant requests respectfully.

Alas, my fate has finally come.

I reach out and touch the robe without speaking.

Then I guffaw, pick up the robe, unfurling it, and put it on myself. Cautiously, the attendants assist me with the robe. They place the crown on with such care as though they were serving the emperor. I hold myself upright and let them dress me.

The soldiers open the palace doors and bow down at the waist. I stride out. The sun has risen, the dawn light hitting me on the face.

Everything that follows is a bit of a blur. The empress dowager summons the officials and announces: ‘The eldest son of Duke Zhao Rui.’

‘The son is also a descendant of Emperor Ming,’ she says. ‘The young child was not to be blamed for the duke’s treachery. Given the current state of affairs, he is the closest descendant and he is clever, quick and skilled, thus I name him the successor in hopes of continuing the empire.’

I laugh when she says this. The history is always written by the victor. Oh, how unjust my father's death was!

All the officials express agreement. Heng Ziyu submits as well. But I catch him raising his head as he kneels down and shooting me a cold and playful look.



The Sixth Year of Nan Jing, Emperor Wen returned to heaven.

In less than a month, the successor ascended the throne.

On the tenth day of the tenth month, an auspicious day, the ceremony of ascension for the new emperor took place at Tai Qing Palace.

The Sun shone brightly and the sky was solid azure.



Music is reverberating throughout the royal city. The princes, dukes and officials have gathered at the bottom of the steps of Tai Qing Palace to welcome me with the kowtow ceremony. After three whip cracks, the Minister of Rites steps forth and reads the empress dowager's decree on his knees. The Archduke, Han Jun, and the Protector of the Seas, Heng Ziyu, lead the three kneeling and nine knockings ceremony.

The ascension ceremony is being held at Tai Qing Palace. The flag of the Lin clan billows in the air. Ceremonial incense burns from a massive censer.

Wearing the Twelve Ornament Regalia and Twelve Pearl Crown, I stand amidst swirls of aromatic smoke at the bottom of the steps. I tilt my head back a little.

With the azure Welkin as background, the main building of the royal city, Tai Qing Palace, is well-defined and seems all the more gigantic and majestic. The towering steps are carpeted with bright red silk all the way to the very top, seeming almost endless. The square behind me is lined with officials flattened to the ground on their hands and knees, not making a sound.

I'm standing here yet I feel lonely for some reason.

Han Xin—or should I say Lin Xin—are you really ready for this?

Finally, I step onto the red silk and ascend the steps.

The people at my two sides bow and kneel down as I pass, lowering their heads and holding their breaths.

The pearls of the crown swing before my eyes, clinking furiously. The October sunlight is dazzling and blinds me as it dances off of the beads. My eyes water and everything I see through the glaring halo seems so transient and surreal.

With the blaring drums and acoustics and the melodious voices of court singers, why is it that I feel this overwhelming loneliness?

The steps seem to be boundless. The people beside me are still kneeling down in turn like a wave.

I look up only to see a figure in dark green. It's the empress dowager. She's dressed in a pheasant plume regalia and a Nine Dragon Nine Phoenix Pearl and Emerald Crown. The intricate and splendid layers, the wide sleeves, the broad belt, the exquisite embroidery on the dark green gown and the brilliant cosmetics make her look extraordinary. She maintains a calm face, showing not one bit of fatigue or sorrow but only the strength that no ordinary woman could come close to matching.

I inhale deeply before lifting up my regalia and continue my slow climb.

Now that it has come to this, I cannot be vulnerable or hesitant. An emperor is always august and self-possessed.

I hold myself straight and my head high and remain this way as I approach the top, unflustered and dignified. It's as if I were born a king: I display all the etiquette and comportment that a king should have precisely and absolutely.

When I finally reach the top of the elevated steps of Tai Qing Palace, I quietly look down at everything below me. The entire royal city lies before my eyes, the beauty of the capital, too, and the blurred ebony mountains in the distance as well. I can actually see beyond the land straight to the frontiers out in the desert.

The howling wind whips by my ears. White birds flutter trippingly across the horizon like white shooting stars. They cry out crisp notes before disappearing into the clouds.

I wonder if Emperor Wen has reincarnated into the commoner's world and will lead the free life of a peasant as he had wished.

By now, freedom is something I can only reach for in my dreams.

"Your Majesty."

The empress dowager gently calls from behind. I glance back to see her nodding at me, signalling with her eyes. I pull a smile and move my gaze back to the square. Raising my arms, I regard them all—all of the cowering officials at the bottom of the steps and all of my subjects in this land—with a smile.

"Long live the emperor!"

"May he live ten thousand years!"

"And ten thousand more!"

The subjects exclaim at the top of their lungs. The lasting echoes resonate in every corner of the royal city, reaching up to the heavens and startling flocks of birds. Their ceremonial gowns and fancy belts flutter in the wind, appearing like one massive ocean wave.

The wind is slightly chilly and lifts the edges of my garments into the air. The exquisite beads hanging from the crown have also been disturbed and are tinkling nonstop.

A bronze bell is rung. High-spirited notes blast forth from horns, low and dissonant.

The red sun has risen high above the horizon, radiating continual rays that dab golden brilliance upon the realm.

This unreachable place has been one of curiosity for me for twenty years. I've seen countless times on the roofs of Tai Qing Palace life's complexity, zest, sadness, joy, farewells, reunions, happiness, anger and everything in between, but who would have known that one day I would be standing here with the entire nation beneath my feet, beholding the land as the almighty emperor.

¹¹² The formal apparel for ruling emperors. Twelve ornaments refer to twelve auspicious symbols and are incorporated in fabric patterns to show prestige. The higher your position the more symbols you would have on your uniform. See picture below.

¹¹³ The crown for ruling emperors. Other male relatives are known to wear similar but slightly modified versions of this. See picture below.

¹¹⁴ 崇(chong2) 文(wen2), literally 'revere literature.'

¹¹⁵ Because the emperor has received the mandate from heaven, rebelling against him would mean disobeying the orders of the gods above.

¹¹⁶ Asarum forbesii, sometimes called wild ginger.

XXIV: *Undercurrent*

he tension in the court is at an all-time high.

I lean to the side of the throne and squint at the scene below me.

A young soldier plastered with blood is kneeling in the middle of the hall, quivering with his head on the floor.

The celebrations haven't yet ended in the capital when songs of bereavement have started ringing throughout the frontiers.

Just last night, Lupine Blood Mounts suddenly appeared to the west of South Hill Pass. Thirty thousand Yan cavalry came like a sandstorm and washed the Rui camp away.

Yuwen Yuan was personally leading the forceful attack and clashed swords with General Zhou Zhenluan and the troops defending the west route throughout the whole night all the way until the fourth watch the following morning. By the time dawn broke, the blood was flowing in rivers and the corpses piled into mountains.

At the fifth watch, the Yan broke through the Rui base camp and General Zhou died in battle for the country.

Over half of the forty thousand men defending the west route were slain and the ones who wouldn't surrender were buried alive.

Once the west route was left unguarded, the County of Ning Yuan laid completely naked before the Yan troops. Immediately, they entered Ning Yuan and wreaked havoc: stealing property, committing arson, slaying any commoner that showed the tiniest amount of defiance. The once prosperous border county has become a living hell overnight.

South Hill Pass lays fully exposed to the Yan. Great Rui is cornered.

The Yan proclaimed that they shall flatten the Rui capital, ride into the Middle Plains and cleanse Great Rui with blood within ten days.

Out of forty thousand men, only this Captain of Yu Wu¹¹⁷ here in the court escaped from the underworld, racing down south overnight to report back to the capital.

He didn't even change out of his bloody armour before walking straight to Tai Qing Palace and retelling the atrocities of the Yan army. The strapping young man weeps as he spits with venom.

There is not one official who is not lamenting. The elderly Marquis Jiang falls to the floor and starts to wail in the court to the point of fainting. The other officials all fall to their knees, crying, imploring to save our nation's pride.

I shut my eyes tightly to restrain myself.

General Zhou—an image of the bearded dauntless and valiant warrior flashes through my mind.

The captain abruptly kowtows and urges, “Your Majesty, General Zhou sacrificed his life for the country; forty thousand men died out there; our people are being terrorized. Are we to stand by and take this shame?!”

“Your Majesty!”

“Your Majesty!”

Everyone kowtows and the hall fills with sorrow. Pei Yuan's father crawls forth and pleads. “Our country is in danger now and we are on the brink of collapsing. Now that it is a life-or-death situation, I beseech not to defend our walls but to fight to the death!”

I open my eyes and glance at what lies before me.

The country is in danger. We are on the brink of collapsing. It is definitely a life-or-death situation.

As I'm about to speak, the empress dowager starts uttering, “General Pei, you are of military background. Certainly you know that a battle is not fought with words alone.”

I pull a small smile and glimpse back towards her. “It appears that You have a plan in mind, Your Graciousness.”

Behind my gold throne decorated with dragons is a thin yellow veil and a curtain of fancy beads. The empress dowager's figure vaguely shows through.

She speaks again. “You have only just taken the throne, Your Majesty. Military decisions are not to be made so hastily.”

I fall silent.

I could not do anything even if I wanted to in this situation. I've only just ascended and I don't have enough support. I'm just a puppet who happens to be holding the imperial seal. Any decree still has to have the empress dowager's seal to be effective.

I've had enough of this kind of life—and I've only done this for one day!

Unknowingly, I've been balling up my fists and it's stinging with pain. I wince before changing to a respectful expression. “So from what You are saying, we should just take the disgrace of defeat lying down?”

“Your Majesty, General Zhou died for our country. Such glorious deeds should be announced to the world. Also, the soldiers who sacrificed themselves should be compensated. That is the most important as of now,” she explains steadily. “As for the military, You might have a history in the army, but,” she pauses on purpose, “it would be best not to push it.”

I feel rage burning within but I do my best to restrain myself. “Then what are Your thoughts on our next steps?” I squeeze through clipped lips.

“Oh, but I am just a woman. It would be wise to ask Your subjects, Your Majesty.”

I let out a silent scoff and look back to my subjects in the hall. They all have their heads up but their eyes are jumpy. From where I sit, I see them in neat rows but there is no liveliness at all—they all look exhausted. I’m somewhat upset: at this critical time for our country, how could they be this lethargic as the backbones of the government. It cannot go on like this!

As I scan across the rows of people, many lower their heads accordingly. The eyes of many high-ranking officials and nobility stray off elsewhere. In the end, I stop at one person. I clear my throat several times. “Marshal Heng, as the Marshal of Fu Guo¹¹⁸, what are your thoughts on the war?”

Hearing this, Heng Ziyu steps forward and gets on his knees dutifully. “In reply to Your Majesty, I will serve the country in whatever way Your Majesty sees fit,” he responds calmly.

That stuffs everything I had back down my throat.

Every decree, no matter trivial or important, has to be approved by the empress dowager and be stamped with her seal. What Heng Ziyu just did was passing the buck to me.

“And the rest of you?” I try not to sound enraged.

Silence takes over the hall in an instant, so much so that I can almost hear their hurried breaths. Inhale. Exhale. It’s so quiet that time almost seems to freeze solid. Finally, Xie Yun shuffles forth and kneels down after glancing around.

Although I already know what he wants to say, I still ask, “Yes, Minister Xie?”

He kowtows before proceeding. “Your Majesty, the court sky-gazer has studied the stars and referenced the books. He has discovered that the skies to the north of our court have lost their auspice. The only way to preserve our state is to relocate to the south.”

After he finishes, it’s so quiet I could hear a pin drop. I glare at him out of the corner of my eye, not speaking.

To think he would actually say that out loud.

As for the others’ reactions, it was only expected. South Hill Pass isn’t going to hold for much longer; the Yan are about to break into the capital. There is nothing on the agenda and everyone is on the edge of their seats. At times like this, the best option would be to run away.

I sigh in my mind. I suppose I can’t blame them. It’s only natural for humans to fear death and they’re not only worried for their own lives but also for their families, from the elders to the children, and their future.

My guess is that they think the capital is going to fall without a doubt and if we don’t relocate then the end result may very well be destruction. If we do relocate, they still get their positions and their salary, even if half of the kingdom would be lost.

I’m still regarding them with a cold look.

I think back to how anguished they were just now, how they wanted to fight. I wonder how many of these proper-looking subjects are all packed up and ready to go, and are just waiting for the royal decree for relocation.

The more I delve into it, the more pathetically funny it becomes.

Was I being too hopeful in thinking I could stop a tidal wave with nothing but my own power?
And how many are watching me now, the emperor, to see whether I would relocate in fear or defend our land?

I cover my mouth and cough before questioning, “I would like to see how many support the relocation.”

Everyone raises their head at my words. Xie Yun looks shocked for a moment. Uncle looks at me fixedly as if he doesn’t recognize me.

I flash a soft smile. “We are all currently agitated, so we should not be hasty to decide. I shall discuss it further with the empress dowager and make a decision then.”

All the officials lower their heads once more, looking left and right and whispering to their neighbours.

I nod to the blue-ranked attendant beside me and he takes several steps down, calling out in a dragged-out voice. “Dismissed!”

No one makes another sound. I get up and leave.

Soon after, two decrees are made and announced in the capital.

One: Styling General Zhou as Marquis Wu Wei¹¹⁹ and giving him a duke’s burial.

Two: Promoting each soldier who died in battle by three ranks and compensating a substantial amount of gold to his family.



I’m standing on a high tower watching mourning soldiers in white carry a coffin into the capital. A single, long file of depressing white snakes through the city. The young warriors are not crying but their eyes are red and swollen. A gust of wind whistles past, making the funeral banner flap.

Actually, I should see General Zhou off even though he was never nice to me and he even gave me the stick once when I was under his command. Now, however, I can no longer do such a thing.

“Your Majesty?” A blue-ranked attendant steps forth cautiously. “It is quite windy here. Perhaps it would be best to return to the palace?”

I inquire as though I haven’t heard him, “Has Liao Tianyi arrived yet?” The attendant answers that he is waiting in Qian Yuan Hall. I take one last look before leaving.

I enter Qian Yuan Hall to see Master Liao kneeling properly on the ground. He quickly bows down when he catches sight of me. I stare at him from the center seat.

When I finally had time to go over all the little things that happened in twenty years, I realised Master Liao had always been a part of everything. When I first went to the mansion after losing my memory, he was a private tutor of the household. When I was imprisoned in enemy territory, he used his martial skills to come remind me not to lose myself; and everything he has done and said since coming back to the capital is very meaningful.

He is still kneeling, unflustered. He sure got all the formalities down.

I finally break the silence. “Just who are you, Liao Tianyi?!”

His shoulders quiver but he quickly regains his composure. “As You can see Your Majesty, I am but a private tutor working in Minister Han’s household.”

I chuckle and walk down from my throne, stopping in front of him. “Spare me the lies, Master. You’ve been waiting for this day for more than a decade, haven’t you?”

Hearing this, he raises his head. He doesn’t look one bit shocked, instead he’s grinning. “Precisely, Your Majesty.”

I look down and chuckle at myself. He kowtows again when I look back up and speaks in a voice so quiet I can barely hear. “I was once a secret strategist for Duke Zhao Rui. I changed my name and identity and took care of the duke’s son after His Lordship’s defeat.”

‘Once upon a time, I was in despair, too. I felt like the sky was collapsing in on me. It took me a very long time to get back on my feet again.’

‘Because there were more important things for me to do. There isn’t anything in the world you can’t get over.’

I hear the words of comfort that he once said to me. I see. I see, now, what his despair had been and what his important mission was. I look at him, a bit lost, like I’m meeting him for the first time.

I just feel tired all of a sudden. Too tired to even vocalize the words on the tip of my tongue. For twelve years I’ve been the idiot who wasn’t aware of anything.

“Oh, is that so.” I plop onto the ground and look at him. “You didn’t go to Feng Hai just to visit family either.”

He nods.

The County of Feng Hai in the north was once the enfeoffment of Duke Zhao Rui. More than seven-tenth of Great Rui’s military manpower comes from there. The county experienced a great amount of trauma following the duke’s defeat and the most direct result was the weakening of the army. There are rumours amongst the commoners that although the duke has died, a portion of his forces still remain and may even be on the rise. The court has sent people to deal with it but they never saw any results.

“Your Majesty, His Lordship may have left but there are still men who are willing to die for the duke.” Master Liao’s eyes shine with excitement. “In the capital as well-”

“Save it.” I cut him off with a raised arm. “We can talk about that later. I...” I freeze. I used the normal ‘I’ when I had been all proper and said ‘I’ in the court. Then I burst out laughing—I guess I’m not a proper emperor after all.

I shake my head as I guffaw. When I finally get myself to stop, Master Liao has a gentle smile on his face, as though he has turned back into that kind and affectionate tutor again.

We sit down face to face and I ask for his advice like I usually do.

“Do You know what the most important thing currently is, Your Majesty?”

I fidget with my clothes. “Of course I do. I only have the title of an emperor. The empress dowager still has the control of the court, only now she’s moved away from centre stage.” Master Liao purses his lips. I flash a lazy smile. “Don’t give me that look. I wanna build up my own power, too, but where could I possibly start?”

He draws his slender fingers across the table, smiling slyly. “Secret forces aside, You still have plenty at hand ready to utilize.”

He dabs some tea and writes out one word as I watch his finger fixedly. Then I look up to clash with his meaningful gaze. “He might have been an onlooker all this time but his right-hand man, Xu Zheng, and twenty thousand of his men are still at South Hill Pass. He would not just leave them behind.”

It’s as if a spark has been lit in my brain. I listen on. “However, he is a very cautious man, very wary of others. You must tread extra carefully not to let him get the upper hand.”

I nod, agreeing, “Xie Yun is for the relocation and although the empress dowager hasn’t made her standpoint clear, she’s basically consented to it. She only hasn’t voiced it in fear of gossip¹²⁰.”

Master Liao watches me steadily. “And what does Your Majesty plan to do about it?”

I let out a deep breath. “We cannot relocate. If we do, the army will fall like dominoes and Great Rui will really be dead as a doornail.”

He starts laughing. “I think you’re the only emperor to ever say ‘dead as a doornail.’” He then changes to a solemn expression. “What You must know is that everything behind anything is all because of just one person.”

The flame jump a little, its light not reaching far into the hall.

Seeing his face, instantly, I understand.

That person is the empress dowager.

Her people are everywhere, whether it’s the capital, the court, the palace or even the army. Xie Yun administers the military, Uncle handles the bureaucracy and the empress dowager herself controls the palace and the affluent families. No matter how you look at it, the power still ends up in her hands.

That’s right. If I wanted to retrieve the power, she would be the first person I need to dispose of.



Wind swirls and whirls about the limpid night sky. I’m standing by the white balustrade, staring out into the darkness. Liu An beside me here is looking around anxiously. He asks me with his head tucked in, “Your Majesty, do You really think Marshal Heng would come?”

I reach for the cold balustrade. “He will.”

Liu An used to be Emperor Wen's personal eunuch. According to tradition, the original servants and concubines must go to the royal hills and mourn after the emperor passes away, never to return to the palace for the rest of their lives. I had just ascended the throne so I didn't have any personal attendants. I didn't want anyone working for the empress dowager near me either, so I spared Liu An from the mourning and made him stay to serve me at Tai Qing Palace.

Just for that, this twenty-five, twenty-six year old eunuch is dead loyal to me.

A person who once served Emperor Wen is at least safer than someone the empress dowager assigns for me.

Just as I finish speaking, Liu An reports quietly but delightedly, "He has come, Your Majesty."

Heng Ziyu sweeps up the steps dressed in casual apparel. Stopping two steps away from me, he bows and kneels down. "Your subject, Heng Ziyu, reporting to Your Majesty's summon."

I dismiss Liu An and say to Heng Ziyu, "Please rise, Marshal Heng."

He does as instructed and regards me after standing up. "May I ask why Your Majesty has summoned me to the palace at this late hour?"

I chuckle and stroll along the balustrade. He trails quietly behind me. "Nothing in particular. I merely wanted to share this beautiful view of the moon with you, Marshal."

He lowers his head, shadows burying his face, as though he's brooding about something.

I glimpse at him, apparently carelessly. "You seem to have something on your mind. Why don't you share it with **me**?"

He looks up sternly with furrowed brows. "Indeed, there is but surely Your Majesty is already well aware of it."

I turn my head back. "If it is about General Xu being cornered, then yes, **I** am." I take a few more steps and sigh, "The situation at South Hill Pass is truly disquieting."

He catches up to me and walks along beside me. I glance over to see his grim expression. "It is difficult to decide whether to retreat or fight and the men at the front lines are restless as well," he confesses.

"Oh, so you have heard from General Xu?"

He doesn't respond and looks off elsewhere. I laugh, "Marshal Heng, **I** thought you would have known where **I** stand by now."

He remains quiet while watching me.

I stand facing the deserted square and say after a long silence. "Forgive **me** when **I** say this, but many of the officials are leaning towards relocating, and if that were to be the case, then the tens of thousands of soldiers out there would become their human shield. Sentimentally or logically, **I** do not think you would want your own men to die for that."

His face becomes even darker. He keeps his eyes on me and his lips quiver a bit.

He's been in the army for many years and hasn't forgotten about his fellow brothers even through his constant promotions. Not only does he try to promote them, he does his best to compensate the families of the deceased soldiers. From these points, he can be considered a compassionate man.

He cracks a smile that has a hint of self-mockery. "When I first joined the army, I had only wanted to have enough to eat. Who would have known all the fighting would lead to this. Most of the brothers who joined the army with me have been lost on the battlefield. As for the remaining brothers, I know very well who they are myself."

"Furthermore," I glance out of the corner of my eye with a smile. "I remember that you had once pledged when you were promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of You Ji that you would preserve peace for the people."

A shred of bitterness seeps through but he recovers the smile right after.

"After the wars in those years, I had nowhere to go but the army. I was lucky enough that I escaped death but I saw more and more of the people's suffering." Then he heaves a deep sigh. "There was a one-in-a-million-year drought. The farmland suffered and the people lost their homes. The officials at all levels committed fraud and kept the funds for provisions rather than providing relief to the masses. I came from a petty background and can sincerely relate to the commoner's pain."

"If we do relocate, the people would only face a massacre by the Yan army," I add. "Then it would not simply be the County of Ning Yuan—it would be the entire northern territories, I'm afraid—that would be wet with rivers of blood and covered with mountains of corpses. No one wants to see that happen."

I pull a thin smile as I continue, "The elite all say that the martial class are all bloodthirsty and battle-crazed. They could never imagine the pains of seeing the blood of the people. I am afraid all they see are lifeless numbers on a memorial."

Heng Ziyu lowers his head, hiding his eyes in the night. I sigh and inquire, "Do you think I am just saying it for the sake of saying it? Do not overlook the fact that I was in the military, too."

It becomes so silent, as if nothing was alive, so quiet that all I can hear is the groaning wind.

Then, finally, he looks back up. He frowns for a moment before his usual smile returns. "So, Your Majesty has said all that to ask me to come forth in court to support the fight against the Yan?"

I turn to face him, shaking my head. "No."

The smile disappears and seems to be replaced by puzzlement. "Then what might it be?" he finally questions.

"From now on, I just want you to give orders for your forces to defend South Hill Pass to the death. Also," I look straight at him. "I ask that you continue being an onlooker in the court."

I spot confusion in his eyes but the night quickly enshrouds it and the typical calmness and ambiguity come back. "How are You so certain that I would agree to that?"

I fall quiet for a moment before pulling a thin smile. "Allow me to propose this, Marshal. If we relocate, once they get to the south, not only will they upset the people's lives, they will bring the war with them to the south. Your enfeoffment is in the south—I doubt you want to see your people suffering."

Icy glints flash across his eyes but he remains silent.

“Also, no matter if we fight or not, you are already a warlord who defies the court in their eyes. You are still of use now, but once they have no use for you, they are going to dispose of you. Those bureaucrats are experts at internal fighting. **I** am sure you are well aware of that.”

The bottom of his eyes is mysteriously dark and gives me a chilly feeling.

Using all my effort to maintain my usual tone, I turn and stroll forward. “I am an army man. I ask that you excuse my straightforward words.”

“Your Majesty.”

His deep voice is extra clear in the still night. I stop walking and turn to face him. His smiling eyes are glued on me. “Your Majesty, are You striking a deal with me?”

I chuckle. “What does it matter whether **I** am or not? We both get what we want—the best of both worlds.”

He studies me with those icy orbs and the next moment he’s only half a step away from me.

“I recall You still being a Golden Guardian only several days ago.”

Defiantly, I look right back at him, fearless and far more composed than I once was. “Given the situation at hand, **I** must take the saying, ‘where there is life there is hope,’ into heart.”

He chortles before slowly drawing near. “Does Your Majesty know what it is that I desire?” he quizzes sternly.

I falter the slightest before laughing it away. “You desire none other than to overlook the royal city from the top of the Tai Qing Palace, of course.”

He sniggers and suddenly grabs onto my shoulder. “And You are certain You can give me that?”

“Since you remember that **I** was once a Golden Guardian,” I sigh as I regard him with a thin smile. “Surely, you remember what **I** had said then.”

The smirk freezes on his lips as he seems to be distracted for a moment. He then squints at me, scrutinizing me with a heated gaze, as though he was trying to recall or determine the reliability of my words.

Under his stare, I start to feel the temperature drop around me as if the cold night has sneaked through my clothes.

Gradually, he tightens his grip and his nails dig into the fabric and then my skin, bringing incredible pain.

Ignoring the panic that has built up within me, I glare back at him without a word.

I don’t believe he has the guts to commit regicide!

Seeing my reaction, he bursts out in booming laughter and then comes in close to whisper near my ear, “I still stand by my original judgement: You’re...very interesting.”

His hot breath hits my skin and makes me shudder. Quickly, I pivot to evade it but I trip and fall backwards. Unexpectedly, he lunges forward and holds me by the waist.

I gasp in surprise: no matter what, I am the ruler and he the subject and this is most definitely a major offense. He, however, looks completely normal as though he was not doing anything wrong.

He waits until I catch my footing, staring at me the whole time with a smirk that is no longer cold. The next thing I know, he has let go of me and is several steps away near the edge of the steps.

I pant as I hold his intense gaze.

“I am very interested in this deal, Your Majesty, but there is something else that interests me even more.”

With that said he walks down the steps and his poised outline fades into the darkness. Only when it has gone from my sight do I feel the moisture on my back that has soaked through my undershirt.

Liu An shoots out from the side and quietly probes, “Your Majesty?”

I do my best to relax and then wave at him. “It’s fine. I wish to rest.”

An array of thoughts throngs my mind on the way back and occasionally Heng Ziyu’s meaningful smile would flash by.

On the other hand, Liu An seems to be uneasy and shift. As he is preparing me for bed, it looks like he wants to tell me something. I frown, asking him, “What is wrong with you?”

He quickly shakes his head, his face all scrunched up. I don’t bother with him anymore and head to bed.

As I walk around the nine dragons jade screen, I come to understand why Liu An had a scrunched up face—two young, fair women with exquisite features are sitting on the Emperor’s bed, wearing nothing but thin, translucent robes that barely hide their figure. They look a bit shy and bashful and even jump a little in their seats when they see me walk in. Immediately after, they bow their heads in a panic but their eyes wander coyly to me before flicking away again.

Are you serious? This joke has gone too far!

I swerve back around the screen and see that Liu An hasn’t left yet. I seize him by the collar. He pales and stutters, “Your Majesty, the empress dowager sent them over so....”

I freeze and feel my throat constricting, preventing any speech.

Unquestionably, the empress dowager sent these women over to continue the royal bloodline and legacy, although it’s also possible that she has other motives.

I finally fling Liu An away after thinking it over. “Get them out of **my** sight!”

He rushes inside with his body bowed and soon the two women walk out, looking quite dismayed as they bow to me.

“I am too fatigued tonight. You are dismissed.”

Liu An shuffles out quickly with them and gently closes the doors. Only then do I let out a deep breath and sprawl out on the Emperor’s bed.

Goddamn this is tiring.

This job isn’t for every—no—*anyone*.

I reach over for the silk blanket and wrap myself in it. I close my eyes.

The coolness of the silk seeps into my clothes and my skin. A cold draft blows in from somewhere, whisking the canopy up into the air, casting looming shadows.

The Emperor’s bed is so big and so cold.

I just want to go to sleep now and never wake up again.

¹¹⁷ Yu Wu is the name of the title, not the person's name, literally meaning 'resist disgrace.' This is usually a Rank 8 position in the military division of the imperial court, Rank 9 being the lowest rank possible.

¹¹⁸ Fu Guo is the name of the title, not the person's name, literally meaning 'assist country.' This is usually a Rank 2 position in the military division of the imperial court, Rank 9 being the lowest rank possible.

¹¹⁹ Wu Wei is the name of the title, not the person's name, literally meaning 'martial defense.' This is a fictional position that was not implemented in any past dynasties of China.

¹²⁰ Aforementioned, women were not supposed to meddle with the business of men, so if she were to outright give orders, she would be disrespecting the Mandate of Heaven which states that only the emperor is the designated ruler.

XXV: Forgiven

The two people in front of me both have their heads down, looking tense as though they were facing their deaths.

Impatiently, I tap my tea cup. “I didn’t call you here to see your constipated faces.”

Song Ruoming looks up cautiously as he fidgets with his cup. “Your—”

In the blink of an eye, I slap my hand over his mouth, shoving back the ‘Majesty’ that would have followed.

I shoot him a dirty look. “Do you want everyone to know my identity?”

“Then...” Pei Yuan starts talking after much hesitation, “Then what should we call You?”

I pucker my lips as I consider the options only to wave my hand carelessly in the end. “Just call me whatever you used to call me.”

The two of them share a look and then turn to me, exclaiming at the same time, “Absolutely not!”

The next moment Song Ruoming regains the solemn, unwavering look he has in court. “You are...so we must follow the formalities.”

I spew out the tea I had in my mouth and cough, back bent over.

What can I say about this bastard? He’s been hell bent on using the formal ways of reference between ruler and subject between us since I ascended the throne, as if we have never been the best of friends. He wouldn’t budge no matter how much I disagree with it. But then again, could emperors even have friends?

I’m silent while I mull it over.

“Suit yourselves. I won’t waste my breath on this issue. I wanted to discuss some things with you today.”

The two nod and I begin as I run my finger on my cup, “It’s a critical time right now. To fight or to leave—no conclusions have been made yet after all this back-and-forth in the court. I want to know just how many people support the relocation.”

Pei Yuan answers seriously, “The Golden Guardians may be sons of the rich but they are all hot-blooded men who wish to stay and defend their country to the death as much as I do.”

I feel a spark of hope but I keep a straight face. “Even if that’s the case, you’re only a lieutenant general. You still have to follow the guardian general’s orders.”

Pei Yuan falters and then sighs, “You are certainly right. The guardian general is Minister Xie’s nephew. Well, what can I do—he is of higher rank than me.”

I scoff, “The empress dowager sure plans ahead.”

“Even if she does plan ahead,” Song Ruoming joins in. “She cannot possibly predict the human variable.” His brows scrunch up. “The new emperor is what the people look forward to, yet she, a woman, is still sitting in during courts. Blasphemy, I say!”

My mind has already gone through countless ideas by the time he finishes.

The empress dowager has been sitting behind the curtains during courts after the ascension of the new emperor. This has already raised much discontent amidst the nobles and the *jinshi*¹²¹. A blizzard of memorials has been sent, all asking for the empress dowager to leave the government. Furthermore, the martial class have been subject to oppression and to them this new emperor could be considered a military man as well. I could dictate them solely because of that.

I smirk to myself. Master Liao was right: I have plenty at hand for me to use. It just depends on how I use it.

Actually, now that I think about it, no matter how powerful or menacing she may be, she is still a woman. She cannot be in the forefront. Also, the battle for power stays within the confines of the royal city so one well-planned operation is all it would take for me to get everything back.

I just need one key component for the *sine qua non* and initiation of it all, and I already have a rough picture by now.

After drinking all of my tea, I shoot up from my seat, startling Song Ruoming and Pei Yuan. I take a glance at their confused faces and explain, “We’ll leave it here today.” Then I push the curtains out of the way and leave the inner room.

Liu An and Wang Shu look up from their *Go* game with a fright. I stride into the room and they follow me.

I signal for Song Ruoming and Pei Yuan to leave first. They can’t perform the proper rituals so they leave as well-mannered as possible. After making Liu An wait outside, I fall back on the *ta* and enjoy some peace and quiet for the first time in a while.

I’ve slowly gotten used to being alone since I ascended the throne. Luckily, it wasn’t too hard because I had been alone before, too. But with the heavy melancholy in my heart, I would still feel that the entire palace is unusually cold. Especially at night time, the flickering candlelight makes it appear even more desolate and deserted.

I let out a soft sigh. With my eyes closed, I feel someone sit down beside me and their icy cold fingertips touching my face. I open my eyes to see Wang Shu looking at me with a pained expression.

Not sure what to say, I joke, “What? I thought I just saw you the other day?”

Wang Shu doesn’t know that the new emperor is me and I don’t want her to find out either. The royal palace is already enough for me to worry about. I don’t want to lose this place too.

"You've gotten thinner," she mutters. "I just don't get it, why you...."

I flash a smile. "You, too."

"I didn't think I'd see you again." She nervously nibbles on her lips. "A few sisters and I are going to go to the palace in a few days." She shudders violently and I place my hand on hers.

"You don't want to?"

Her eyes redden. "Who knows what'll happen next in this chaos right now?" she says as she wipes her eyes. "The new emperor is the same—nothing has changed in the capital."

Silently, I sigh and turn away, unable to bear looking at her.

The new emperor hasn't been able to stabilise the current situation. The gentry and officials are divided and the people are losing faith because no one knows if we are to fight or submit. Just on my way here alone I've witnessed too much of the capital's disorder.

Battles are plaguing the north and after the County of Ning Yuan fell, a large number of refugees came flooding south. Homeless, the young and healthy can still manage to feed themselves but the old, weak, widowed and disabled can only afford to lie by the side of the road and await their fates. The rich have taken the opportunity to hold on to their grains and raise the price for food. Many husbands have taken their wives and children to leave the trouble behind. Even the residents of the capital are at a loss, let alone the refugees. The stories of the cruelty and ruthlessness of the Yan army are spreading at an incredible speed.

There is a seemingly continuous crowd of people leaving. Those who could leave have already left with their families packed up. They head in an unfamiliar direction only for some hope of living on.

Every morning, Xie Yun would kneel there declaring that the relocation should not be delayed any further in order to protect the establishment. The empress dowager would remain quiet behind the curtains so everyone looks at me to see what I decide.

The more I think about it the angrier I get. I sit up abruptly, frightening her. I sigh and push back the feathery, black locks by her ear. "It's getting late. I have to go."

Wang Shu watches me with big, teary eyes. I don't speak anymore as I let go of her hand and leave the room.

I chose to meet them at Jade House to evade the eyes and ears working for the empress dowager. The place is packed with patrons and workers coming back and forth. The scent of cosmetics and perfumes make their way into every crevice. Red candles burn bright. The men who have come seeking pleasure all have on an intoxicated smile while the girls return theirs with a coy, alluring one.

The darkness has started to set in. The paved limestone road is nestled with dirt-plastered refugees, their clothes tattered and hair unkempt. They look straight ahead blankly and when someone walks somewhat in their direction, they reach out with all their efforts in hopes of receiving some generosity. I feel sorry for them and motion for Liu An to give them some money. He approaches them but the refugees rush forth and start fighting before he even gets the money out.

Saving one is easy but saving all is a task of much difficulty.

I return to the royal city in a bit of a daze. Just as I hop off the horse, an attendant walks over and tells me quietly and respectfully, “The empress dowager wishes to see You, Your Majesty.”

I give a mocking laugh as I step in Yong An Palace. The maids and eunuchs quickly leave. I walk over casually to the empress dowager who is dressed in expensive silks. She has her head resting on her hand as she relaxes on the *ta*. I take my seat and ask leisurely, “What did Your Graciousness wish to see **me** for?”

Lazily, she blinks open her eyes. “Your Majesty left the palace today?”

I nod. “Yes. The palace proves too tiresome, so **I** went for a quick stroll.” Then I chuckle. “**I** greatly appreciate Your care for **me** in addition to all the help in governing the country.”

She slowly sits herself up, seemingly oblivious to my sarcastic tone. “**I** heard Your Majesty went to Jade House.”

I crack a thin smile for an answer. As expected, she has eyes on my every little move.

“**I** understand that You have had a frivolous past. However, You are now the emperor. **I** implore You to not give in to Your sensual pleasures.” She straightens her sleeves. “If it is women You are after, the ones in the palace should be more than enough.”

I repent with my head lowered. “You speak wisdom, Your Graciousness. **I** shall change for the better.”

Her eyes snap open. The hollows under her eyes are carved in deep, making her look fatigued as though the palace has been syphoning off of her life force.

“The mayor reported several days ago,” I start, “that a large number of refugees have entered the city. What **I** witnessed today was also as such. I am afraid we must deal with this before it is too late.”

“What does Your Majesty have in mind?”

“According to policies, current state facilities should take refugees in and distribute rations. However,” I pause purposefully, glimpsing at her. “The number is too high this time. **I** fear that the current facilities would not be sufficient.”

“So You are saying...?” The darkness enshrouds her old, smiling face.

“In **my** opinion, we should set up an aids and relief office with specially appointed individuals in charge of distributing water, food and medicine, as well as taking in the old and young.” I watch her quietly with a smile. “What does Your Graciousness think?”

She turns to me, saying, “That is more than necessary, don’t You think, Your Majesty?”

I understand what she means with little effort. She supports the relocation while I’m doing my best to stall, to wait for the perfect chance for me to clear the playing field. In her opinion, if we are going to relocate then setting up relief aid would just be a waste of resources and naturally be ‘more than necessary.’

I think upon it in my head before looking back up. “**I** understand Your concerns but if we are to stand by and do naught, we will lose the people’s faith sooner or later. And if that happens, then **I** am afraid the relocation....”

Her figure shudders. She glares at me warily and inquisitively. Fearless, I steadily smile back at her. She puckers her lips as though to speak but I remind softly, “One should not overdo things, Your Graciousness.”

She seems to lose her focus for a moment before turning away from me.

I continue quietly after getting up and performing the rituals, “If the empress dowager does not object to it, then I shall make an edict for the creation of the aids and relief office. The people shall be grateful for Your generosity, Your Graciousness.

When I reach the door, I take one last glance back at the old woman curled in her throne. She’s sitting in the dark and appears to be shivering, possibly from the cold or perhaps from something else.



The next day, I issue a royal edict:

The empress dowager would like to show her gracious condolences to the refugees by establishing aids and relief offices in eight locations in the city and five along the state road heading south to the capital. Water, food and medicine will be distributed and seniors, women, children and the sick will be taken into care.

I take extra care in choosing officials for the job, picking thirteen low-ranking civil officials from the list the Ministry of Personnel gave me, assigning one to each location.

They kneel before me with their heads on the ground as I instruct slowly, “It is not a major position, but one that comes with much responsibility, nonetheless. I hope you do not disappoint.”

“We shall act in absolute accordance to Your holy edict.”

“A bright future awaits you if you perform well.”

“Yes, Your Wise Majesty!”

These thirteen people all entered politics through the imperial examination process, but they haven’t been able to achieve much due to oppression from the nobles and the rich. The mission I gave them today is more or less a gesture to other civil officials.

Unfortunately, it is all I can do for now.

They leave swiftly under Liu An’s lead and I let out a small breath of relief. I hear a shuffling sound and Master Liao paces out from behind the curtain. He is no longer the private tutor for the Minister’s house—more like an imperial tutor¹²². I gave him the position of Just Counsellor of the Privy Council¹²³. He does not hold any true power; it’s just a position that directly serves the emperor.

Master Liao told me everything the other day. He was Father’s strategist who was never known to the world. He created the Eidolons—similar to the Wraiths. After Father’s defeat, he sneaked his way into the capital, tracked me down using limited contacts and became a tutor in the mansion.

He sits down beside me. I sprawl out on the table and look at him at an angle, sighing. “I’m exhausted.”

“Your Majesty, do You plan to keep the relocation on hold?”

I flip my head to the other direction so I don’t see him. “Of course not. I’m just waiting.”

He remarks softly, “The war does not wait.”

I snatch a memorial in my hand, waving it at him. “This is an urgent report from Xu Zheng over at South Hill Pass.” I pick a few more up. “These are from those old farts going on and on about leaving.”

“And what do You—”

“I’ve said it a billion times: I’m not going!” Furious, I fling all of them away.

“Then You must bring forth ways to deal with it.”

I close my eyes halfway. Ways, ways, ways—there isn’t a day when I am not racking my brains to find some.

Seeing my silence, Master Liao keeps going. “The Yan are closing in on us. Your Majesty should make a decision sooner than later whether to defend or abandon South Hill Pass.”

I understand that what is holding Heng Ziyu and I together is a weak bond of trust. The only reason I could strike a deal with him is because of the lives of the twenty thousand soldiers at South Hill Pass. If anything happened there, the two of us would quickly be at sword’s point.

No wonder they say it’s hard being an emperor. It’s fatiguing both physically and mentally—it’d be surprising if they led long lives.

I fidget with my sleeves. The imperial regalia is golden yellow¹²⁴ with gold embroidery, yet it is cold to the touch.

“If Your Majesty has an idea, then please make the decision as soon as possible,” he continues very sternly.

It’s not that I do not have any ideas or that it’s impossible, but I still can’t take that step. Because once it is initiated, there will be bloodshed and wholesale slaughter with no end.

“The more You hesitate now, the more the men at the frontiers will suffer. Under such urgent times, are You going to—”

“Enough!” I roar as I snap back up. Master Liao immediately stops while keeping a solemn expression. I pant a few times to catch my breath as I brood, my arms propped on the table.

Currently, everyone and everything is pushing me into a dead end.

My hesitation won’t buy me any more time. I have two choices before me: relocate or fight. If I want to fight, then the most urgent thing is taking back power!

Master Liao kneels down, unsmiling. “Your Majesty, the Eidolons are ready. We just need that spark to set it all in motion!”



In the great hall spreads a looming darkness. The candle flames shake profusely in the vast, empty space, nearly going out several times. I'm dressed in my court uniform and sitting on my throne. My shadow casts on the wall behind me and dances vigorously like the candle flames.

Finally. Finally.

The doors of the hall swing open with a creak and I hear someone enter. I look up a little to see Liu An bowing. "Your Majesty, General Pei Sr. and Guardian Lieutenant General have arrived."

I close my eyes again. "Summon them."

Pei Yuan and his father, General Pei, pace in and kneel down before me. I give a light nod and say, "Please rise."

They thank my favour and get up, standing silently in place.

I regard them without a word. Pei Yuan is currently the lieutenant general of the Golden Guardians and the person directly below the guardian general, while his father, General Pei, is also an influential person in the martial field of Rui.

I start nonchalantly, "I recall that you, General Pei, have wanted to fight to regain our national pride."

His head snaps up. "Your Majesty?!"

I remain emotionless. "I wish to do the same, to recover our dignity."

He starts shuddering violently and plunks back down on his knees to the cold, solid tiles. "Your Majesty..." he sobs.

"But it all depends on whether General Pei will assist **me** or not." I smile as I rest my head in my right hand.

Not knowing what to do, Pei Yuan kneels down too, watching me dumbly.

"I have an opportunity for you two to contribute to the country," I explain calmly.

They stare back at me blankly, as though they haven't heard me correctly.

"I saw you, General Pei, when I was young. You had always protected our country and our home. Time is the best proof of Your loyalty. You once told **me**, after decades of serving in the army, You only wished you were born in the same era as Emperor Shun. You wished to have been there to found the empire because there was no opportunity to leave a name for yourself." I clear my throat quietly and gaze at them. "And now, such an opportunity lies before You."

He's shaking all over, jerking his graying hair along with it. "Wh-what is it that Y-Your Majesty wishes for us to do?"

Very good.

I smile albeit sternly. "You might not personally command troops anymore but the twenty five thousand Imperial Yu-Lin Guards stationed by the Han River were all brought up by You. I believe they are faithful to You."

His eyes sparkle as though he has reached a realisation. "They are to defend the capital with. We shouldn't deploy them so easily, Your-."

I turn slightly to place my left arm on the table. I look down at them. “The situation of the capital is dire right now. Are You going to wait until the Yan have broken through our walls before deploying the Yu-Lin Guards?”

Hurriedly, he bows his head. “I dare not. It is just that Minister Xie’s permission must be obtained for the deployment of the Yu-Lin Guards.”

I scoff. “Minister Xie is the backbone of the state yet he fears battle. Are You, the heroic General Pei, going to stand by and watch our country fall into despair and our people into danger?” I slam my hand on the table and roar, “How will You face Emperor Shun when You leave this life? How will You face the Pei ancestors?!”

He watches me, shocked, but the next moment his eyes clear up. He knocks his forehead against the ground. “I beg Your forgiveness. This old man was not thinking straight. Please give Your orders, Your Majesty, whatever it is You wish. I may be old but I can still ride a horse and nock an arrow!”

Slowly, I stand up as I stare at Pei Yuan. “And you?”

It appears that he has been stirred up by our talk. His face is flushed and his voice husky. “What are Your commands, Your Majesty? I shall serve You to the death!”

I take my time to answer with a kind smile. “The Golden Guardians are the backbone of Great Rui and naturally, cannot bear the indignities of an outside clan ruling the country.” I gradually raise my voice. “Pei Yuan, are you willing to take the place of Guardian General?”

Pei Yuan is twenty four years old. A man his age would want to achieve something and leave a name for himself, so the position of Guardian General is the most alluring bait.

He has his head lowered, seemingly contemplating. I don’t rush him either and the hall falls silent save for the inhales and exhales.

When he finally lifts his head up, there is a serious expression on his face. “I am, Your Majesty!”

I chuckle. “Good, as expected from a military family!”

They lower themselves to the floor. I drop my smile and state sternly, “You must recognize that you might not return from this.”

Their figures remain stiff, their heads lowered. “We have decided and we have no regrets.”

“If I do not succeed you will lose your heads!”

They remain quiet for a moment before squeezing through clenched teeth, “Your orders, please!”

General Pei wants to fight for national pride and erase the indignities Great Rui has suffered with blood, while Pei Yuan wants to advance in the ranks and contribute to the empire. I give them what they want and they obey my commands. This is our pact and also my promise to them.

At the top of the empire, I need even more power and even more people on my side. Not only Master Liao, not only Heng Ziyu, not only the Eidolons... In my current position, the only way I can stay unscathed in the center of the whirlpool of power is by tightly controlling my own power.

Tonight's affair is a fair trade just like the one between Heng Ziyu and me. They will become pawns under my command and I will give them what they desire. Perhaps, this is the art of being an emperor: using everything usable amidst the chaos to secure oneself and annihilate one's enemies.



The moonlight seeps through the window and meanders along the ground, illuminating and dimming the inside of the hall, while the brisk wind gushes in from outside.

I exhale deeply as I sit in the dark with my eyes closed.

It's so quiet...

"Your command, Your Majesty?" Master Liao's voice comes from my side.

I keep my gaze down and ask after a pause, "Which watch is it now?"

"In answer to Your Majesty, the Hour of the Rat¹²⁵ has just passed; it is the Hour of the Ox¹²⁶ now."

I look up slightly and wave at him. "Just a bit longer."

Every night, the Golden Guardians split into three groups of a hundred men each and take four hour shifts. The officials enter the palace for the morning court at the fifth watch, or the Hour of the Rabbit¹²⁷. The Guardian General also comes at this time to inspect security.

The more the merrier—and the more likely I will succeed.

"How are things with the Eidolons?"

"In reply to Your Majesty, fifteen of the top Eidolons have been gathered. Your order is all they are waiting for."

"And I can count on them?"

"Rest assured, Your Majesty. These are all faithful followers of the duke. Not even the best palace guards can compare and they are even more loyal to you. Even if it does not go according to plan, You will not be affected."

I smile wryly as a thick sorrow wells up from my chest and suffocates me.

The guardian general, Xie Yun's nephew, is in charge of the entire Golden Guardian force. And he is the first person I must eliminate.

I take a deep breath to soothe the unease.

I used to be close acquaintances with him when I served in the Guardians. He was part of our drinking parties and scuffles in the streets, but now I must end him.

Perhaps, there are no friends, no family in the eyes of an emperor, only deceitful calculations.

Melancholy stirs in my heart but vanishes the next moment.

There is never an absence of blood in a political war. No one can reach the top without climbing over dead bodies. This is my fate and if I cannot rid myself of it then I shall keep my head up and proceed to face it with pride and determination.

In my veins flow not only the dignity and virtue of royalty but also the cruelty and objectivity of a mandarin. The dignity and virtue do not allow me to become someone's puppet; the cruelty and objectivity force me to take back the power that belongs to me.

I am gambling with my life as the chip.

The evening wind sweeps past, blowing my sleeves into the air.

I tilt my head back, mumbling, "Ancestors of Lin, please watch me from the heavens, whether it be victory or failure."

The sound of the water clock¹²⁸ resonates from afar, every drop knocking into my heart. I just sit there in the darkness for four hours and bear every minute of the passing time. Millions of thoughts race through my mind but it's as though my mind is empty at the same time.

A figure suddenly materializes in front of my mind's eye and gradually turns around and it's... it's Murong Yu.

I crack a pitiful smile and it becomes a laugh.

We won't have to meet again if I die. We can just exist in each other's hearts. But if I live to stand at the top of this empire then...then we are really going to clash swords.

Sweet and bitter interweave in my heart, forming a conflicting feeling. A sour emotion wells up from within and then transforms into a thousand icicles, stabbing into my veins, the pain so strong I can't even catch my breath. My nose stings and tears wet my lashes.

Is this... Is this my fate too?

With his face in my mind, I can no longer restrain the painful tears. They slide down my face and drip onto the regalia, disappearing in the blink of an eye as if they never existed. All I feel is a devastating and chilling loneliness surging towards me to bury me.

I hear a clear, long chime of the clock in the distance. It's the signal of daybreak. I open my eyes and see that the sky has begun to whiten.

Abruptly, I stand up, straightening my regalia, and roar to the men behind me without looking back.

"Move out!"

¹²¹ A jinshi is someone who has passed the Imperial Examination as one of the top-ranked examinees. More information here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_examination

¹²² This is someone who usually has taught the emperor since he was young and acts as a consultant or counsellor to the emperor. Strictly speaking, this is a low-ranking position but in reality, this position comes with immense power—the ability to directly influence the emperor.

¹²³ This was an academic position implemented during the Late Tang and Song Dynasty. Jobs included personally serving the emperor and providing advice for the emperor on state matters.

¹²⁴ Starting from the Sui Dynasty (581 – 618), yellow became a colour only worn by royalty.

¹²⁵ 11pm to 1 am.

¹²⁶ 1am to 3am.

¹²⁷ 5am to 7am.

¹²⁸ For more information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_clock#China

XXVI: Subterfuge

The veil dividing the inner hall and the front hall has been raised.

I place a hand on the attendant's arm and let him lead me to my throne. Very slowly, I walk one step at a time, not too fast and not too slow, with a solemn comportment and an upright posture.

I finally know why Emperor Wen had always walked so slowly—the Pearl Crown is heavy, even heavier than the Guardian helmets. It's so heavy that you must walk one step at a time, as slowly as possible, if you don't want your neck to snap. Also, there is a heap of beads dangling from the crown, completely obscuring your vision. I would definitely have fallen over if I didn't have the attendant guiding me.

I suppose not just anyone could be the emperor—at least he can't have a history of neck problems.

Also, the dress has so many layers that it bugs the hell out of me. Why, are royalty especially prone to hypothermia?

"Long live" starts reverberating from below like a tsunami suddenly forming from a peaceful ocean. The sea of colourful uniforms kneels down and their foreheads touch the ground.

I take my hand back and pick up my train before carefully stepping up onto the base of the throne. Suddenly, I trip on my regalia and basically fall onto the throne.

It's okay. They are all kneeling so they didn't see.

I give a slow nod after adjusting my expression to one that is proper and stern. Liu An then calls out, "Rise!"

His sharp voice echoes in the hall. I hear the shuffling of what seems to be robes dragging against the tiles. To my side, I can see the empress dowager getting into her seat behind a veil of gold and jade.

I scan the people below me and nod to myself. Very good. I have everyone right where I need them.

I do have one complaint though—the throne is too big. When you sit on it, there’s a huge empty space on all sides. It’s so uncomfortable not being able to rest on anything. What’s more is that you must sit upright and remain cool, calm and collected before your subjects.

Being an emperor in one word—tiring.

When I notice that everyone is looking at me with puzzlement, I realise that my mind was wandering again. I cough out of awkwardness and inquire, “**My** subjects, anything to report today?”

I know I’m just wasting my breath. The most urgent matter at hand is deciding whether to leave or stay.

I watch all of them nonchalantly. Uncle has his head down; Heng Ziyu has a relaxed smile; Xie Yun has his eyes closed; everyone else shares a look. Finally, someone comes forth after a suffocating period of silence. I take a closer look and find that it’s the elderly Minister of Revenue.

“This subject would like to report to Your Majesty.” He looks up. “The thirteen aids and relief offices that were established several days ago have taken in countless refugees and the allotted funds and rations have nearly been used up. I am afraid that we cannot keep this up if nothing is done.”

I frown. “**I** remember **I** granted over ten thousand taels of silver. Why, was it not sufficient?”

He takes some time to answer. “We cannot use the grains in the state reserves to ensure the necessary portions for the army and the palace. Therefore we had to purchase it on the market. And due to the inflation of rice, our funds have depleted sooner than expected.”

Hearing this, I know it’s outside my comfort zone. I’ve studied the arts of war since I was young and observed plenty of political battles but these common everyday issues aren’t exactly my forte.

“Then, do you know how much of the grant remains?” I decide to put him on the spot after some deliberation.

His expression suddenly changes and starts slurring some indistinct answer. I feel furious—don’t pretend to know shit when you don’t. But when I think about it again, I have already heard that the court officials are corrupt and the civil servants are useless. However, seeing it with my own two eyes is quite a different experience.

Seeing my lips pressed together in silence, he starts shaking like a leaf. At this pressing moment, a young official steps forth. “In reply to Your Majesty: the grant totaled thirty-three thousand taels. Only five thousand taels remain and the grains have been depleted. I implore that something be done as soon as possible, Your Majesty.”

I quickly grow a liking to this young, bright-eyed official. I chuckle, “And how much grains and silver remain in the state reserves?”

He lowers his head and responds in no time. “In reply to Your Majesty, there are currently five million nine hundred and eight thousand seven hundred and thirty-six pikuls of grains, sixty-nine million five hundred seventy thousand taels of silver. Two-tenths of this is reserved for the army and one-tenths for emergency relief during winters.”

He must be a capable man to be able to remember such detail. I shoot a look at the shivering old man. I’m going to find a way to give him the sack and promote a few other officials.

But that's not the most important thing at hand right now. I can't help but look out the palace doors.

A thunderous bang suddenly comes from the palace gates. The sound of metal colliding, sporadic footsteps and screaming startle all the officials. I rejoice—it has begun!

The shouts are becoming louder and louder when suddenly something falls just outside the doors and explodes. The horizontal beam above the doors comes crashing down with the thick smoke, shooting out loose rock and wood splints. The guards on duty by the doors scatter apart, yelping. The officials are all caught unawares and fall into disorder. A Golden Guardian scampers in, panting, “Y-Your Majesty, assassins have sneaked into the palace!”

I spring up from my seat, looking straight ahead. “Where are they now?”

“Right in front of Tai Qing Palace!”

“Their numbers?”

“Unknown!”

As expected, battle cries ring from outside. It doesn't sound too far away and is closing in fast. The gates suddenly burst into flames, painting the horizons red, and opaque smoke rises. I hear a twang and a shrill sound zooms through the doors towards the throne. Alarmed, I turn to dodge the arrow and it scrapes past my cheek.

“Your Majesty!”

Arrows fly towards the screen and I shout, “Protect the empress dowager!”

The next moment I see silhouettes flickering chaotically behind the veils. The maidservants are running and shrieking. Then a shower of arrows rains down and the screen tips over after swaying a few times.

The fallen screen reveals a fallen empress dowager, cowering on the floor.

“Escort the empress dowager back now!”

Everyone else is unnerved and helpless, probably wishing to grow a pair of wings right about now. Several officials near the door are even about to escape.

“What's the matter?” I bark as I scan the hall. “You stay right where you are!”

My sudden call stops the tangled crowd of officials and they stare at me with a flustered expression. I snap, “Shut the doors!”

The vermillion doors slowly close on one other, separating us from the bloodshed and gore, and the chaos gradually dies down in the silence. I take a look around and say while trying to calm my nerves, “As the backbones of this country, you bring shame to it by showing such vulnerability!”

It seems the red luminance has spread out and is getting stronger by the minute. From here, I can hear pillars and beams collapsing and the servants running and screaming. I'm soaked in sweat but I still act calm.

I only have one chance, just this one. It's all or nothing.

I slowly sit back down and close my eyes. A bloody picture surfaces in my mind: the guardian general slain, rebellious soldiers murdered, blades flashing bright like snow, horrendous crying... Everything is red.

Outside, a storm of fire and blades is raging and rivers of blood are flowing, while inside the towering Tai Qing Palace it is as silent and stiff as quietus. The only audible sound is that of rushed inhale and exhale of everyone.

I let out a deep breath and enunciate, “**I** am the son of God; **I** hold the Mandate of Heaven. **I** have naught to fear, let alone a few petty assassins!”

Time slowly trickles past in silence. The shrieks and cries seem to linger in my ears. I’m sitting tall on my throne above all else, glancing over every one of their faces, meeting with Heng Ziyu’s eyes from time to time. He looks composed with a light smile and unreadable look in his eyes. I flash a quick smile at him, too, before turning away.

A lifetime seems to have passed and I feel as though keeping calm has drained all my energy.

“Your Majesty!” The thud of boots, the clank of armour and a booming voice comes from outside the hall. It appears someone has run up the palace steps and knelt down. “Reporting to Your Majesty, the assassins have been eliminated!”

It’s Pei Yuan’s voice. I look up and remain still.

“Your Majesty, the assassins have been eliminated. Please punish us for our inadequate protection!”

Some people are showing joy as their eyes go back and forth between the doors and me. I gaze straight ahead and say firmly, “Open the doors!”

The vermilion doors slowly swing open. A bloody Pei Yuan is kowtowing and behind him kneels a mass of soldiers just as bloody as him.

The cheers of the officials in the hall are thunderous and I can tell they are all too overjoyed for words.

“Reporting to Your Majesty, unfortunately we have lost the guardian general. Casualties total three hundred or so Golden Guardians.”

I keep my gaze on him and state solemnly, “**I** am ever so grateful for Lieutenant General Pei’s selfless service. **I** hereby declare: Lieutenant Guardian Pei is promoted to the position of Guardian General and shall oversee the protection of the royal palace! Every other soldier who has rendered outstanding service will be promoted by two ranks and receive gold!”

“We thank Your Majesty’s kindness!”

I spot Xie Yun’s face abruptly paling. He teeters a few times, about to fall over. Uncle is breathing heavily but I can’t tell what he’s thinking. I pull a thin smile.

There’s no rush. The good stuff has yet to come.

I hear someone running and the next moment I see a crimson feather. The person falls to his knees, calling aloud, “This is the general of the Imperial Yu-Lin Guards reporting. Hearing the alarming news of assassins in the palace with ill intent, I deployed the Yu-Lin without permission. I beg Your forgiveness.”

I guffaw. "You are not in the wrong, rather you are to be rewarded!"

"The Yu-Lin Guards have surrounded the capital," he adds. "The assassins and their accomplices shall not escape!"

"Excellent!"

I slowly stand up and walk down the steps. The officials hold their breaths and bow when I pass. The only sound in the entire hall is of my long regalia sliding across the tiles and of the pearls on my crown clinking against each other. I step through the doors and stop at the top of the palace steps. The steps are covered with blood flowing in winding streams that has started to run up my garment.

"Long live the emperor!"

Heng Ziyu shouts with opened arms and the rest echo him. Both the civil and martial officials kowtow behind me and the soldiers before the palace fall to their knees.

At last, I have become the real master of this city.

From now on, I need not fear nor be wary. No one can harm me and no one can determine my fate anymore.

I tilt my head back and smile to the sky. *Are you seeing this from up there, Father?*



Golden Guardians who are loyal to me quickly took control over the entire palace. In the name of trauma, I sent the empress dowager back to Yong An Palace and put her under care of the attendants and maidservants, not allowing her to leave without permission. Master Liao loathes her because he believes she caused the deaths of my father and mother and has suggested deposing her so as to eliminate any future problems

He is walking with me in the gallery and still hasn't stopped nagging me about being too soft.

I heave a sigh. "I wouldn't have lived until now if it were not for her, Master. One life for another; let's just call it a draw. **My** hands are already stained. **I** do not wish to have **my** relative's blood on them like hers."

His gaze wavers but he insists, "The empress dowager is cunning and she still has some people loyal to her. I fear future complications if you do not dispose of her."

I straighten my sleeves and keep walking forward. "Of course **I** hate her. **I** *will* avenge the death of my parents." Then I titter, "Complications? **I** do not fear any complications, nor am I spineless. Whatever life has in store, **I**'m going to take it into **my** own hands. **I** won't let anyone else interfere."

He seems to falter before answering quietly, "You have changed, Your Majesty, but you are also the same."

I turn my head over to him and smile, "**I** will take that as a compliment."

Seeing the Imperial Garden in full bloom of purples and reds, I feel rather depressed.

Of course I shouldn't spare the empress dowager but I should not act now of all times. Killing someone isn't hard but what is hard is doing it usefully and doing it right. Furthermore, the playing field isn't stable just yet. If I killed her, that would mean splitting away from the Han clan—splitting away from the nobles.

Everyone needs to stay united during this national crisis in order to prevail.

Plus, once it settles down, I still need the power of the nobles, whether to govern the country or to ease the people.

"That reminds **me**," I say to him who has caught up. "Don't forget to compensate the deceased soldiers' family."

He looks extremely moved as he bows. "How generous, Your Majesty."



After an afternoon nap, Liu An tells me that there is someone here to see me about the insufficiency at the aid and relief office. I let Liu An summon him after a moment's consideration.

Unsurprisingly, it's that bright-eyed official. He starts tentatively after performing the rituals. "This issue cannot be delayed any further. Lives are at stake, Your Majesty."

I pause before asking, "What is your current position?"

He replies that he is Deputy Minister of Revenue. I nod, indicating for him to continue.

"The war in the north seems unpromising and there will be more and more refugees. I don't think the aids office will be able to handle it if we do not receive more funding," he continues warily.

I frown and let out a sigh as I grow sullen. Even though there is plenty in the state reserves, it won't last long with these expenditures. Also, it's truly peculiar that the funds have been used up this quickly regardless of how much the market prices have risen.

Something clicks in my head. If common sense can't explain it then there could only be one explanation.

Furthermore, if the price of grains does not drop then the masses will still be in distress, and a battle cannot be fought with distressed citizens.

I've already run through several notions before responding calmly, "I grant you special permission to withdraw more funds from the reserves. I shall allot you another fifty thousand taels and entrust all thirteen locations in your hands. Do not disappoint **me**."

He falters but looks gleeful and bows down to the ground. "I thank Your Majesty on behalf of the people for Your generosity."

I dismiss him with a wave of my hand and sigh as I watch him leave. I am in need of help right now and I hope he is a talent who will help alleviate my problems.

I'm lying on the *ta*, thinking about the problems at hand, when Liu An comes in.

"Your Majesty, Protector of the Seas requests a meeting," he whispers.

I snap to attention. Heng Ziyu coming at this time most likely doesn't mean anything good but I have to see him. So I give him a nod and sit up, fixing my clothes.

Heng Ziyu strides into the back room with a stormy expression, looking displeased. He sits across from me after briskly doing the rituals.

I'm too lazy to bother with small talk so I inquire without looking at him, "What is it, Marshal Heng?"

He nods a little. "There are only tiny traces and I should not alarm You, but it's just that this may have severe implications. So please forgive me, Your Majesty."

"Something that troubles the Marshal, huh," I chuckle. "Please, be **my** guest."

He raises his brows and says under his voice, "I discovered a few days ago during a regular check that there seemed to be slight discrepancies with the army funding. I immediately delved into it only to find that there was a lot more behind it."

Surprised, I look up at him. He nods seriously to me.

My stomach jumps. This is definitely a serious issue.

I've long known that the officials of Great Rui are corrupt. The military expenditures are also so large that a few rats are inevitable, but to be able to alarm the Protector of the Seas it couldn't possibly be something minor.

This plus the problem with the aids and relief office are enough to make me break out in cold sweat. My heart seems to be suspended in midair as I stare at his lips, not making a sound.

He leans in and speaks quietly again, "I wasn't here when the war started so I had no way of knowing, but after investigations, it became clear that someone has been tampering with the military provisions, mixing in second-rate substances before sending it off to the front lines."

I start shaking, I'm not sure whether out of anxiety or anger, and can't get a single word out.

He spits through clenched teeth, scowling. "I had thought only the provisions were faulty but it turns out that even the relief grants were looted. Well over half of it!"

Thunder seems to boom from above as I stare fixedly at him.

The answer has presented itself to me in no time and it's making me shudder with apprehension.

Xie Yun is Minister of Defense and all military funds must go through him. The person in charge of the funds for the aids and relief offices is that elderly Minister of Revenue. Uncle has always been assisting with administrative work, so he would definitely be involved if we were to get to the bottom of this.

Three ministers, all having a hand in this disgraceful matter!

"Marshal Heng," I give him a stern look while trying to settle my nerves. "Where is the proof?"

“Deputy Minister of Defense has already disclosed everything in private and handed over the books, and,” he pauses with a meaningful look. “You should have already sensed that something was wrong with the relief funds.”

Yes. I scoff. If I could figure that much out, there was no way a calculating person like him couldn’t have done the same.

“So You’re saying...?” I ask.

He abruptly gets up and kneels down beside me. “What is it that Your Majesty wishes to do?”

I prop my elbow on the table and rest my head on my hand. I’m not sure what to do now.

There has been a massacre just recently; the general guarding the royal palace has been executed; the high-ranking officials supporting the empress dowager have been either demoted or deposed, seriously decreasing Uncle’s power. This has upset many affluent families and they are all cautious of their speech and behavior. The nobles have already gone into panic mode. Now, if three ministers were to be punished too, then who knows what would happen.

I turn my head a bit to look at Heng Ziyu. He looks stern with his flinty eyes and tightly pressed lips but I can see a hint of the usual self-assured smile.

Can I trust this person?

My instincts say no. There’s only a weak sense of trust in addition to the secret deal between us. I’m much more inclined to believe that he just wants to emasculate the other rich and powerful players.

After much deliberation, I start timidly, “Allow **me** to reconsider. Please, Marshal, if You could retire—” I wave my hand only for him to clutch it.

Though frightened, I remain composed. He leans in with an intent stare. “Can I take it that Your Majesty is brushing me off?”

I jerk my hand but he just holds on even tighter and comes even closer, trapping me against the table. We’re mere inches away and our breaths mingle with each other, making the distance seem far less than it is.

I try to twist my wrist but find that I can’t move the slightest. I pretend to be unruffled with a smile. “What are You doing, Marshal? I am still the emperor right now. Please be mindful of Your manners.”

“Manners?” he starts chortling as if he’s heard the funniest joke, his eyes twinkling. “I recall that there was none since that night, Your Majesty. You even used the informal pronoun with me.”

Bastard. I only wanted to use that to feel closer so that he would agree to the deal. I grind my teeth together and do my best to ease my distress as I look back at him fearlessly.

“You didn’t sleep at all last night, did You?” He smirks, leaning closer. “To be able to turn the table around like that, Your Majesty, it impressed me very much.”

“The world is as unpredictable as the ocean currents. There are more things that You do not know.” I tilt my face away from his breath.

His dark, bottomless gaze suddenly sharpens, a chilling feeling exuding from within. Anger starts to sizzle in me. His gaze can make his enemies sweat in fear; his hands have taken the head of

the enemy general amidst a thousand other men; his comportment has made the entire court kneel down in welcome. But I am not afraid. I look back at him steadily.

"I would like to know just how many secrets You have," he breathes in my ear, blowing hot air on my skin.

"Marshal," I shudder and shrink back from the heat but I maintain a composed smile. "Are You trying to make **me** go on a killing spree?"

He pauses and moves his face to look into my eyes, chuckling. "Being as clever as You are, I think You know what it is I want."

I scoff and continue, "Well, **I** think You are being frivolous and disrespectful."

Suddenly, I feel pressure on my chin. He gently lifts up my face and flashes a meaningful smile. "I've never wanted to know a person like this, Your Majesty."

"First, just a son of an official, then a Golden Guardian, then, magically, a few days later, the son of a duke, and finally, the emperor, even defeating the empress dowager overnight." He carefully caresses my cheek with his cold fingers. "I've seen many people, yet not a single one can do that."

I crack a pained smile. I never chose any of those things. There's too much despair, too much pain, yet who would know and who would listen?

Seeing this, he surprisingly ceases his movement, his fingers crossing my cheeks and coming to a stop by my lips.

"I've actually seen You smile when You were still a Guardian, but now You don't anymore and even if You do it's a bitter smile."

"To be honest," I slowly raise my gaze to meet his. "**I** am just too tired nowadays."

Without a word, he hooks his arm around my waist and presses me closer to him.

I titter, "**I** bet You were tired as well when You had to face all the criticism, complaints and pressure from having flooded Jin An. **I** bet You could not smile then. And even if You did it would have been a bitter one as well."

A shudder seems to run through him and his eyes lose focus. He lowers his head and I can feel his warm breaths brushing past my ear, entrancing like the sweltering noon winds of the frontiers.

I should be trying my all to break free but I feel exhausted all of a sudden.

My vision goes blurry. I only see a world full of yellow sand and a lean, lonesome figure amidst it. As these painful thoughts go through my mind, I suddenly feel something moist on my neck. I start, only to find myself still in a compromising position in his embrace and his head in the crook of my neck, lips less than an inch away.

"Did You hurt Yourself getting on the throne today?"

I quickly look up. Our faces are so close we can see ourselves in each other's eyes. Keeping his dark eyes on me, he brings my left hand up to his lips. Burning air hits my fingertips and makes my stomach flip. A numb and extremely uncomfortable feeling spreads from my fingertips.

So I suppose he saw it all.

"As I'd expected," he whispers, "You're very interesting, Your Majesty."

I flash a lazy smile while trying to repress my unease. “Say, Marshal, shouldn’t we try to find a solution to this corruption issue instead?”

He sticks his fingers into the hair draping on my shoulders and twirls it around in between his digits while smirking. “You’re being very naughty, Your Majesty.”

I close my eyes and grab onto his arm with a bit of force. He isn’t holding on tightly enough and I easily escape the confinement of his arms. Briskly, I walk over to the table and sit down, pouring two cups of tea while I’m at it and pushing one towards him.

“I bet You are thirsty after such a long talk. Here, have some calming tea.”

He has already returned to his usual state and is sitting about two steps away from me, holding the cup. I poke at the leftover tea leaves and say after taking a sip, “This issue needs to be discussed at length, so there is no need to be anxious. It is going to take more than a day or two to change such a deep-rooted problem.”

He laughs but I don’t hear a bit of warmth. “You must know that war does not wait.”

I give him a smirk. “But a wake-up call does not take long.”

Heng Ziyu stays until dinnertime. He doesn’t even show the slightest bit of reluctance towards my half-hearted—I swear on my life it was half-hearted—invitation and stays for dinner in the palace.

I’m not sure how I feel about dining with him at the same table. The whole time I keep experiencing mood swings but I have to act as if nothing is wrong. I shrug. I’ll just think of it as emperor training.

The next ones I must eliminate are the ones requesting the relocation.

The ringleader must fall first in order for the entire operation to fail.



The following morning during court, the imperial auditors headed by Song Ruoming start their offense before Xie Yun even opens his mouth, accusing him of instigating concern, speculating about the ruler’s decisions, causing distress for the citizens and acting against the law.

Song Ruoming is extremely talented at speaking and goes through every single of Xie Yun’s mistakes and wrongdoings, not leaving out the tiniest thing. He even brings out the ancient record of Xie Zhen raping a commoner’s daughter. He stands there in the hall, pointing at Xie Yun with flames coming out from his eyes and a waterfall of imputations showering out from his mouth, looking rather heroic and determined to rescue the country from evil. His booming voice and coherent argument along with his forbidding expression as he recounts Xie Yun’s crimes awes many.

I sneak a yawn, not forgetting to hide behind my large sleeves. I ask Liu An beside me after moistening my mouth with a sip of tea, “How long has it been?”

Liu An answers with a grimace, “Auditor Song has been at it for two hours.”

I’m at a loss for words. I knew this guy had skill in this area but I didn’t think he could go for two hours without drinking water. God knows where he got the ability to do this. He really was made to be an imperial auditor.

If I just so much as make a tiny mistake in the future—miss court a few times, add a girl or two into my harem or renovate my palace a bit—he’s surely going to scold me to death while not using a single curse word!

A shudder runs through me and I tip the cup, spilling tea on my clothes.

No wonder the ancients all say you can offend anyone you want except the imperial historians and auditors.

As Liu An is bowed down, wiping my clothes, Song Ruoming spits out his last words. “Those who suggested relocation should be killed!”

I can’t see Xie Yun’s face anymore: the pathetic fellow has almost shrunk into a ball. I think he just wants nothing more than to dig a hole in the ground and hide there.

I really want to laugh my ass off right now but I clear my throat to stay solemn. Both sides quiet down immediately. I feel countless eyes on me—I suppose this is what is meant by on ‘pins and needles’.

I smile but my tone is dead. “The capital is the basis of our everything. I am certain everyone is aware of this. If we transplant the capital, we will lose everything.” Then I shoot up and glare downwards at them, roaring, “Did you all forget that no country has ever remained unscathed against the Yan?”

This disturbs the stillness of the hall. They freeze and don’t make a sound, leaving nothing but silence. I observe every one of their faces. Some are shocked, some are frightened, some are pale... A chilling feeling seems to creep into the hall and wrap itself around everyone, lingering.

I keep looking down at them, studying their expressions. Most have lost their colour and have begun to sweat. Only Heng Ziyu is composed as usual and smiling. I pull a thin smile too.

“If the ship goes under everyone goes with it!” I bark, “Auditor Song said, those who suggested relocation should be killed. In **my** opinion, it does not even count as a suggestion, but rather fallacy! Causing distress for our soldiers and citizens, destroying the legacy of our predecessors, making everyone a sinner!”

As I say these words, it becomes more and more obvious in my mind.

If we were to relocate then the state would fall apart, the country would collapse and the legacy of the Lin ancestors would crumble to ashes.

I will not allow that. Never!

Xie Yun’s knees buckle and he falls to the floor, quivering.

I feel disgusted as I stare at him.

There isn’t anyone in the court who remains undefiled by the deceits and lies of the power struggle. As a high-ranking official—a Minister—he is not loyal, pockets the state’s money and

instigates disobedience to the throne and even disregards the people of the country. I can't imagine the horror if this were to continue and be learned by the people under him!

I am going to set the record straight today!

"Guards!"

"Mercy! Your Majesty!" he wails.

It echoes within the large, hollow hall and surrounds me.

Two Golden Guardians quickly march in. I turn away, flicking my sleeves.

"Send Minister Xie on his way!"

XXVII: Resolute

Xie Yun was immediately put to death before the palace gates and his head has been hung up for all to see.

The entire Xie household of more than one hundred and fifty had been sent to prison and were later sentenced to exile to the southern borders, never to leave. All personnel who had supported the relocation were sentenced to death and those related to them had been exiled or degraded. After such an ordeal, all who advocated the relocation have been cleared as though a thunderstorm has blown through the court, completely cleansing it.

Here in the gloomy inner hall of Tai Qing Palace, I am sitting at a table in silence.

The cries of the Xie family are still resonating in my ears. The sharp blades came down and blood flew out with the bloodcurdling metallic flashes—the high and mighty elite had become lifeless bodies in the blink of an eye. For a split second, I think I see the blood spreading across the ground, washing past the palace gates and steps, even submerging the palace.

'Tis the life of every king.

I close my eyes.

Every deadly struggle for the throne, every battle to the death for power ends with the shedding of the blood of the defeated. Those who have lost their lives would eventually become dust, buried beneath the heavenly glory of this palace.

Every time I advance, every time I prevail, my hands will be stained with more blood, my sword will end more lives and my feet will trample over more bodies. I can no longer point fingers at the empress dowager. My hands are no longer pure and are even more defiled than hers.

The victor has always been the king and the loser the sinner. There are always those who fall and those who rise in the power game. At this moment now, I am at the height of the royal palace, looking down upon all those beneath me, while the dead will remain eternally buried in the underworld.

I come to realise that...I seem to have changed. A part of my heart has slowly become tough and cold, and not even bloodshed can make me feel sympathy anymore.

Is this what being an emperor means?

I turn slightly, my gaze falling on the sword holder by the desk. The Sword of Ding Guang¹²⁹—it is said that Emperor Rui Shun wielded Ding Guang in his hands and resolutely usurped the throne, murdering the royal family of the previous dynasty, establishing the court that governs the vast land of Great Rui. Since then, Ding Guang has been hung in Tai Qing Palace to symbolise the protection from the spirit of Emperor Shun of his sons and descendants and of the continuation of the Rui Dynasty.

I spring up from my seat and take the sword from its holder. I bluntly break off the black silk cover and pull the blade out of its sheath, a glaring light dancing off of it.

The emperors of Rui were learned scholars and the ancient sword had been abandoned in its shrine in the confines of the palace, locked away for more than a century. Yet today it has been brought back, sharper than ever.

I pick up the wine vessel on the table and splash the cool liquid on the metal. A rich aroma quickly wafts through the building as the wine drips down the sword tip. I drag the weapon behind me as I slowly walk towards the doors, the tip sparking little bright dots against the ground.

The doors swing open at once. The Golden Guardians bow down beside me. All the officials of the court are at the bottom of the steps.

I take my spot at the top and lift my arm, pointing the blade to the sky. The sun shines down on the blade and reflects off as a shimmering ray. I smile proudly as I watch them from above, steadily announcing:

“I shall personally slay anyone else who supports the relocation, anyone else who does not fight, with the sword of Emperor Shun!”

The entire palace falls silent like death. I take a quick glimpse at Uncle kneeling properly and looking down. I can’t tell what he’s thinking. However, for just a moment, I see his expression freeze before he closes his eyes tightly in pain. Heng Ziyu’s head is slightly raised and his keen eyes linger on me.

“Mark **my** words!” I roar.

Everyone bows down and touches their foreheads to the ground.

Escaping would mean losing half the country while fighting might mean total destruction.

I’m trying to tell them that the sons of Lin do not fear death. Even if we are to die, we will let those Yan know that we can never be conquered!



The scarlet sun has already sunk to the west and its slanted rays cover the doorstep. There’s no wind making my long, black robe flutter. The soft light draws my shadow out into a long arc. I rest my head on my right hand, frowning as I flip through the mountainous pile of memorials.

I start feeling a bit chilly. I suppose October is late autumn already but I insisted on reading memorials out at the Liu Yun¹³⁰ Pavilion outside Tai Qing palace. It's not that I am in the mood for sky-gazing or like viewing flowers, but it's just too cold inside. Even if the fire was lit, I would still feel cold to no end.

Once Xie Yun died, all the personnel behind the army funding corruption case were exposed and over a dozen officials have been executed. The Minister of Revenue had been deposed and the bright-eyed official has taken charge of the ministry. And Uncle...

My head hurts when I think about him.

Uncle's crime could be very serious. I could very well use my power to overrule it but...

Being stuck in the middle really sucks.

Master Liao walks in. I glance over at him after he performs the rituals. "How were things today?"

He nods, replying, "The Ministry of Revenue has put out a part of the grains in the state reserves for sale and the market value immediately dropped. The wealthy who had been holding onto their stocks followed suit and the price plummeted. Many of them have gone bankrupt."

I nod as I sit up straight. "Excellent. I hope they have learnt their lesson."

"There have been more and more refugees coming from the northern counties. Fortunately we have set up the aid and relief offices, but it is not a long-term solution."

Exhausted, I sigh, "The capital means life for them. I cannot just strip them of their only hope, can I?"

"Of course not," Master Liao's gaze is as heavy as my sigh. "But the capital cannot support much more. If things take a turn for the worst..."

"All right, I get it." I shoo him away. "I really will look for solutions."

He looks down again and hesitates for a long time. "Your Majesty, the Eidolons reported that there have been people asking around the red light district and markets for someone."

I've turned back around to face those frustrating memorials. Goddamn. Why can't they just write bigger? Would it kill them to do so?

"Why are you getting worked up for just one person?" I ask impatiently.

"But You do not know who it is, do You?"

"I don't need you to tell me that the person must be of importance for people to be putting in that much effort to search for."

"They were asking around for Minister Han's nephew."

My hand falters and the brush shakes. A fat drop of ink falls on the snowy paper and quickly spreads out into a cloud.

I shift uneasily in my seat and face the other side so he doesn't see me.

"Did you see..." I pause. "Did you see who they were?"

"Deep set eyes, tall nose bridges, large build: probably not Rui."

I take a deep breath to soothe the tidal wave of emotions raging within, trying to sound normal. "How many were there, roughly?"

“A few more than ten.”

I do not speak. It is Master Liao who breaks the silence at last. “Your Majesty, do you want to...?”

I close my eyes; they’re feeling slightly sore.

“I suspect they are Yan spies. Your Majesty ascended the throne under the identity of the eldest son of Duke Zhao Rui. The commoners in those places do not know of your previous identity; please rest assured. But even so, we should not run the risk. I implore You to give the orders to end them once and for all.”

The turbulence in my heart has circulated a million times over and I feel so painful but I can’t show any of it. I try to ignore the dryness of my throat and reply, “Do as you see fit...”

“But spare one and bring him to me. I...I have some questions.”

“Your Majesty.” His expression darkens. “I do not know why but I humbly advise you not to be soft—.”

“Get out!” I grab a memorial and hurl it behind me. I hear hurried footsteps slowly fading away. I feel powerless, my body falling limp all of a sudden.

Quickly, I lower my head and cover my face to hold in my pain. The tears in my eyes seem to have slowly welled up from the bottom of my heart and the bitter sorrow gushes towards me, almost drowning everything. A heartrending melancholy rises, slowly eating away the illusion of strength I’ve created for myself. I can no longer hold back the thick layer of watery fog that has lined my eyes and they come tumbling out.

Finally...at last.

Is it him? Murong Yu...is it really?

I haven’t the courage to think of him these days. Not one bit. I could only smother the longing for him deep within my heart, too scared to touch it, too scared to look back.

Since I ascended the throne—punishment, reward, sabotaging the empress dowager, overturning the court—it’s been one thing after another. All-night meetings, officials rushing in and out, highly stressful situations; he hasn’t been on my mind at all. Or maybe, using work, using memorials, I’ve been forcing myself to not have a moment of rest to think about him. Because if I so much as let my guard down for a split second, the longing would start running free like a never ending river.

I bite on my lips as I think of his face, tears rolling down one drop at a time.

Perhaps he already knows that a new emperor has taken the throne, and maybe he’s even making an ambitious plan to force Great Rui into surrendering. Perhaps he does not know that that person is me. There is no way someone could go from a low-ranking general to the almighty emperor.

Is our confrontation inevitable?

The person I love the most has become my enemy. Is this the irony destiny had planned for us?

Is he only carelessly exposing his target to search for my whereabouts because there will soon be a deathly battle?

A tear drops onto the spotless table, threatening to break loose if it moved the slightest.

I clutch a memorial with a death grip, holding it so hard that my knuckles turn white and the memorial becomes a ball.

I don't know how long I can hold this country together for. I wonder what it will be like to be at sword's point with him.

I had once said that I didn't want fame or power and that I wanted to live a free life, but instead I was forced to ascend to the highest position that oversees the entire country. He is going to see it as nothing but lies and betrayal.

His figure slowly appears before my eyes. It's clearly within reach but it seems unreachable. His expression is reserved and his eyes cold, as if accusing me of lying and betrayal.

In an instant, I realise that he...

He is the happiness I used to have. The warmth I used to have. Even if I had to abandon everything, including my power and my life, I wouldn't want to lose what I once had.

What should I choose?

Why am I still forced to make such harrowing decisions?

Are you telling me that emperors cannot have heated passion and can only stay in their icy cold palace, high above others, and be lonely old men?

I miss him. I can't even help it. I miss his smile, his arms that held me, his warm embrace, his desirous panting...

Murong Yu...

The faint words stop by my lips before they get a chance to be heard.

I can't say his name. I can't miss him. All because...because I am the master of this realm, Great Rui, and he is the enemy I am going to face.

Destiny—I hate my destiny.

In this world, I've been abandoned by my parents, yet I believe he... I believe he was true to me.

If I could choose again, I would never leave him.

But the problem is that there is no fix for regret in this world.

Murong Yu, tell me. What are we going to do?

Can we not meet on the battlefield?

I hear footsteps approaching but I don't look up. I feel a burst of anger.

"Get out! I don't care who you are."

A dark shadow is cast on the ground and elongated by the lanterns. It stops for a mere moment before slowly drawing near.

"I said. Get-!"

"I didn't come to the palace to get yelled at by Your Majesty."

Immediately, I lift up my head. Heng Ziyu is bent over, picking up the memorial from the ground. I take this chance to quickly wipe the tears off with my sleeves.

He straightens his posture and walks over. "Your Majesty?"

I turn away from his questioning eyes. "Sit, Marshal."

He sits down leisurely, placing the memorial on the table while studying my face. I catch a hint of suspicion. I close my eyes and say, "Let us get down to business."

He doesn't respond and instead asks after a long pause, "What happened to Your eyes?"

I act as if I have not heard him and unfold the military map on the table. "Better sooner than later. I would like to discuss defensive strategies." I push it towards him. "I would like to hear Your thoughts."

I can be miserable but now is not the time. I always feel like he can see right through me.

His expression becomes normal after a short disturbance. "Ning Yuan has fallen and South Hill Pass does not look promising. Xu Zheng might be guarding it with all he has got but being surrounded by enemies does not allow for optimism."

I raise a brow. "Please continue."

Calmly, he traces a line from South Hill Pass to the capital with his finger. "Here are six hundred *li* of flatland. Once the Yan break through the pass, not only are the lives of the soldiers guarding the pass in danger, their cavalry will also be able to cut right into the soft bellies of the Central Plains, and the capital will be the first to come under attack."

I pause with my finger on the map. "There are nearly one hundred thousand troops around the capital plus the thirty thousand of Your men on the road, that's a total of one hundred thirty thousand. The Yan have one hundred thousand..."

He waves his hands in dismissal. "Your Majesty, we might have an advantage by numbers but six-tenths of them are footmen and this is a disadvantage for us."

"That I know," I sigh. "Footmen could not possibly compare to cavalry. Furthermore..."

"Furthermore," he continues, "the Yan cavalry have exceptional attack power. One of them would equal ten of ours, hands down."

I stare at him. "It sounds like You already have plans in mind."

"Does Your Majesty really plan to defend the capital to the death?" He stares back at me with a smile.

"Why else would I kill so many people?" I retort through clipped lips.

He chuckles before asking seriously. "Is Your Majesty still willing to defend the capital if the price of doing so is too big?"

"No matter the price, as long as we can secure the capital—secure the north—any price is worthwhile."

He cracks a chilling smile. "Did You know that the phoenix burns itself in order to be reborn from its ashes?"

"You mean...?" My body seems to have snapped to attention.

He stabs at the capital with his finger. "Pull all troops from South Hill Pass back to the capital. Completely surrender the pass!" His eyes darken. "We retreat back into the capital and put all troops into defending it. The capital has stood strong for more than two centuries. Its walls are high

and solid, and its moat deep. It has been specially designed to withstand water and fire and we do not fear a depletion of food or water. We will be able to hold our own solely on these points!”

Our eyes meet in a heated deliberation.

Give up South Hill Pass, retreat fully back to the capital—I had said this to Uncle as well.

“This is a dangerous move. If our troops do not retreat swiftly enough, it is likely they will get intercepted and devoured by the Yan, in turn jeopardising the capital. However, the price would be even more if we continued to guard the pass!”

Our gazes reach each other’s heart and it becomes clear.

Abandon the extra weight and invest everything to be reborn from the ashes.

“There will be some losses if we do this.” I look at him solemnly.

He nods. “Naturally. But there is nothing we can do. We must give some to gain some.”

The limpid moonshine from outside the pavilion casts onto his gallant face, covering his chiseled features with a frosty layer. The Heng Ziyu before me seems to have completely changed. He’s no longer sulky and speechless like he is in court, nor is he suggestive and provocative like he is in private. Instead, he lets off an awesome air, once again the Marshal of Fu Guo who had trekked across blade and blood, marched across the realm with a sword in hand and embarked on the path to power.

I shudder as I watch him, words momentarily failing me.

“Your Majesty.” He looks up, his eyes emotionless. “What are You going to do if we still are not able to protect the capital?”

“I will burn the bridges and fight them with my life,” I look straight at him and steadily reply. “Once the walls fall, I will light the city on fire so the Yan will drown in blood trying to capture it. Our troops, royalty, officials, our old and weak, our women, and children shall all die with the enemy!”

He reaches out nimbly and holds my fingers. “Even if it’s Armageddon, my sword and I shall accompany You through it!”

Immediately, the Ministry of Defense issues an order for the troops in the northern frontiers to retreat to the capital at once and set up defenses as soon as possible. Any who defy shall be decapitated. The thirty thousand men heading up from the south must speed up their pace and not make any delays whatsoever, while the twenty thousand at South Hill Pass retreat in groups.



The October wind brings chills as I stand at the top of the city walls. I pull my clothes tighter around myself and watch the dead leaves dance in the autumn breeze.

Life is so fragile, fading away like smoke in the blink of an eye.

“You’re probably feeling sorrow for the advent of a new season again, aren’t You?” Heng Ziyu chuckles beside me.

I look to him and scoff. “There is no way I would be like those sentimental poets. I was a soldier after all.”

“Your Majesty was once a Golden Guardian, all right, but have You been on the battlefield?”

I turn my gaze to the distance where the vast land lies. “Have You heard of the three thousand men who never returned from Lan An?”

“That...” He falters. “Yes, I have. General Zhou was forced to dispatch the three thousand men on a rescue mission but all three thousand perished.”

I close my eyes and the bloody scenes reappear.

“I was one of the three thousand.”

Doubt flashes in his eyes. I look down, laughing, “Really, I was just lucky.”

Without waiting for his reply, I stroll towards the white steps, my clothes flapping in the autumn wind. Liu An comes running to me and kneels down.

“Reporting to Your Majesty, Duchess Yu Qing, along with Mu De the Eldest, are waiting in the front hall.”

I nod and descend the steps. Carelessly, I catch a glance of Heng Ziyu looking at me with a tense expression, the surprise having not yet faded. I pull a thin smile and look straight ahead.

Following the death of Xie Yun, his assets and all the funding that he embezzled in the past have been moved to the state reserves. The Minister of Revenue and Uncle have both given up their wealth for redemption. Consequently, other officials and wealthy families followed suit and emptied their pockets. All of a sudden, the state reserves is overflowing with so much money, I’m not sure if I should be happy or disappointed, but at least this way, there will be enough to support the aid and relief office.

The nobles and officials have shut up for good.

Only the empress dowager remains as a problem.

As I enter the hall, I see the duchess holding a small infant in her arms, head lowered to make him laugh. The fair child is giggling, completely oblivious to the tempest that is approaching. My footsteps startle the duchess and she tries to get up to perform the rituals but I stop her with a wave. “Save it. Let us skip to the talk.”

She sits down tentatively. I smile at her, saying, “Let **me** see the Eldest.”

She gets up and passes the infant to me. I take him into my arms after a short moment of hesitation and carefully study him. He has a neat, handsome face. Babbling sounds are coming from his small mouth. His eyes are black and bright and his long lashes flutter as he blinks. A very cute baby.

The duchess is sitting across from me with a dazed expression, her eyes never leaving the child.

The story goes that Duke and Duchess Yu Qing are like two halves of a whole¹³¹; their love is strong beyond anything else. No doubt that the duke’s death has greatly impacted this woman. I’m afraid all her hopes lie on this baby now.

Now, I can finally keep my promise of taking care of the duke's wife and kid.

"Duchess," I start steadily. "The capital is a dangerous place to be. **I** have been considering sending you and the Eldest to the South for safety."

She looks up and stares straight at me, momentarily forgetting her manners¹³². I smile and look at the child again. I can't help caressing his pink cheeks. "**I** made a promise to the duke. You can also see it as...as preserving the royal bloodline."

Because fighting could mean complete destruction.

She shudders violently and lowers her head, rattling the pins in her hair.

"If we win, **I** will fetch you; if we do not, then this child shall be the only continuation of Great Rui!"

She quivers as she looks back up and meets my gaze, looking weak and boneless. Tears slowly stream down her fair complexion.

"Your Majesty..." she sobs.

"**I** will arrange trustworthy people to accompany you to the South along with several distant relatives and loyal, senior officials. Even if **I** were to fail here, at least the South will still be able to harbour the descendants of Great Rui."

She suddenly falls to her knees, knocking hard against the cold, bare tiles.

"Your Majesty," she sobs through her covered mouth. "Please don't say that."

I only feel mournful as I listen to her sniffing. Sorrow fills my heart and I am speechless.

The child is still giggling and wiggling around in my arms, looking pure and joyful. I hold him a little tighter and laugh bitterly as I feel a sting in my nose.

He's just turned one and hasn't yet learned about the world he lives in, yet he's going to have to leave his home behind.

Not able to bear looking at him anymore, I pass him back to the duchess and turn away from them. "We better act fast. Go back to the Manor tonight and pack your clothes, jewelry and money. **I** will send you off tomorrow morning."

She's shaking so hard that she cannot speak. She makes a choking sound and holds the child tighter in her arms.

I do not know what the results of resisting means, nor do I know what kind of path this child will embark on. He can choose to live a normal life or to stay true to his surname, but no matter what, I must leave behind someone for the royal bloodline. I must!



☞Early morning the next day. The skies are still gloomy, the only luminance being the faint glow in the east.

The soldiers have removed their armour and have dressed as house servants and guards. Several distant relatives of the royal family and a few eminent senior officials are kneeling before me, quivering without a word. The duchess is weeping silently in the carriage with the Eldest in her arms.

Solemnly, I raise my wine vessel. “This **I** toast to you all. You have a long journey ahead. **I** hope that you take good care of the duchess and protect Great Rui’s bloodline.”

I begin to hear their muffled sobs and they become harsher.

“What are you crying for? **I** am still alive¹³³!” I bark after I’ve heard enough.

One of the elder officials lifts up his head, his snowy white hair fluttering in the wind. He looks at me before repeatedly kowtowing. “Your Majesty...”

I tilt my head back so no one sees the tears in my eyes.

None of us knows whether the capital will triumph or perish, or whether we will ever meet again.

I pour the wine out in all directions and stand here in silence, sending the carriages and guarding party off as they gradually fade out into the distance.

¹²⁹ 定(ding4) 光(guang1), literally ‘settle (with) light.’

¹³⁰ 流(liu2) 雲(yun2), literally ‘flowing clouds,’ means floating clouds.

¹³¹ The author used this metaphor to describe their love. It is said that there once were birds called *jiandie* (鸚鵡), *jian* being the male bird and *die* being the female bird. *Jian* had a left wing and *die* had a right wing so they could only fly in pairs.

¹³² Those of lower status could not look directly at the eyes of a person of higher status, and women could not look at men’s eyes.

¹³³ The few occasions where officials would weep on their knees is when the emperor passes away.

XXVIII: Assassination

“*C*ould you raise it a bit higher please, Your Majesty?”

Impatiently, I raise my arms so the attendants can dress me. They then comb my hair and put on the crown for me.

These guys are so annoying.

They start wailing like banshees outside the door every morning when the sun has just risen. Even if I hid myself in the blankets, I can still hear their sharp, screechy voices. Neither a man’s nor a woman’s—it just sounds creepy as hell.

What’s the damn point in being the emperor if I can’t even get a good night’s rest?

I sigh as I grab the outermost layer and put it on myself. The attendants quickly step back with their backs bent but sneak glimpses from time to time.

I remember once in the front lines when we were chatting, we started talking about the palace. A soldier who came from a farming family said with a longing expression, ‘The emperor’s hoe must be made of gold too!’ The rest of us almost laughed our asses off. If you asked me, being the emperor sucks. Not only can you not sleep well, you have to change a billion different outfits a day.

The ceremonial apparel during ceremonies and court; the auspicious regalia during celebrations; the regular or casual wear at other occasions; travel attire during hunts. There are corresponding hats: the court crown, royal crown, casual crown, travel crown. Each outfit has five versions: leather, cotton, double, single and chiffon. A violent shudder ran through me when I heard this—I can’t handle all that even if I were a clothes hanger!

The custom is to pay respects to the empress dowager after washing and dressing but on the account that she is recuperating from trauma and shouldn’t be disturbed, I don’t bother wasting my time. After the visit comes the morning read, which includes the Holy Sayings and the Official Records of emperors of past dynasties. The Holy Sayings is just a collection of advice, warnings and sayings uttered by past emperors and the Official Records is a list of major events during their rule. I lose all desire to read these just from looking at them stacked, filling up the entire desk. They expect me to wake before daybreak, miss my meals, be lively during the day and sleep soundly at night—as if anyone could ever do that.

Anyhow, we're in such a desperate situation that I just cancelled it altogether.

Just as my mind is wandering, Liu An comes forth, quietly urging. "Your Majesty, it is time for breakfast. You have court afterwards."

If waking up is the most important thing of every day, then eating would definitely be the second most important. And the emperor needs to eat as much as anyone else! I shoot a glare at him before walking around the screen.

The officials have been waiting patiently in the hall. The golden silk drapes are raised and the palace maids bow down to the floor accordingly. I walk from the side hall to my throne, cautious to not lose my stern composure.

The officials kneel down and say their prayers for my longevity. The eunuch in charge of rites calls out, "Report if need be, otherwise you are dismissed!"

I rest my head on my right hand and watch them lazily. Yeah, Heng Ziyu isn't here. Of course it was I who gave him the permission to. He's been busy as a bee, strengthening the city's defense, training the soldiers and organizing the rations. The officials look at each other.

Hmmph, it doesn't take a genius to know what they're thinking in their puny minds. The duchess and the Eldest fleeing to the south has undoubtedly given them an excuse to relocate again.

Unsurprisingly, one person steps forth and bows with his jade *hu* in hand. "In reply to Your Majesty, this humble servant has a few words."

"Speak."

"With the Yan army approaching the capital, I implore Your Majesty to allow part of the royal family and nobles to head to Jiangnan to ensure the safety of Great Rui's roots."

"I have already sent the roots off," I reply coolly.

"But, Your Majesty, I fear that the duchess and the Eldest--"

"What is there to fear? Why should they leave when I have not left? Are you saying that their lives are more valuable than **mine**?" I scoff.

"Your Majesty, the empress dowager..." He suddenly falls to his knees. "Her Graciousness experienced great trauma and needs to recuperate in peace away from the capital. May I humbly suggest that--"

"The empress dowager is the mother figure of the nation and should share the good and the bad with Her people," I interrupt with a smile. "I believe Her Graciousness would say the same, don't you think so?"

Then I warn lowly, "Do not bring this issue up again."

The officials all lower their heads. I summon the Minister of Revenue after some thought. "How much grain remains in the capital?"

He bows. "In reply to Your Majesty, there are five million nine hundred and three thousand seven hundred and thirty six pikuls left in the state reserves, out of which three thousand pikuls have been allotted to the aid and relief office. Also, eight locations have closed due to the war, so food is actually quite plentiful."

The current numbers seem sufficient but if we are besieged for the long term then the calculations get complicated.

“How long can we last with the capital’s population in mind?”

“In reply to Your Majesty, half a year at the most, three months at the least. However, winter is approaching and keeping in mind the army and relief expenditures, it may not last long enough if the Yan laid siege for a long time.”

This is a challenging problem. The capital has a large population so in order to ensure food for everyone, a massive amount of food must be transported. Soldiers won’t be able to stand without enough food, let alone fight.

Song Ruoming briskly walks to the center of the hall. “Xing¹³⁴zhou, not far from the capital, has several million pikuls of rice in storage, Your Majesty. It could be transferred to the capital to aid the shortage.”

Before I even open my mouth, Assistant Administrator¹³⁵ Xu Zong starts shaking his head. “In my opinion, the rice in Xingzhou would be better off burnt.”

I’m puzzled as to why he would say so. He explains calmly after stroking his beard. “The closest Yan forces have reached Lingzhou and are brandishing themselves in display of power. Anzhou is just past Lingzhou. If we arrange for labour workers to transport the grains, additional troops must be deployed for protection. This is very costly and the grains may very well become the Yan’s. With that in mind, it would be wiser to just burn it all.”

He shoots me a look of slight satisfaction. “If Your Majesty is really concerned about not having sufficient food, why don’t we move some people out of the capital? Less people means less consumption. It would kill two birds with one stone.”

I purse my lips and remain silent.

It’s not that I want to see people in a bad light but he is simply too wicked. I am not allowing the officials and nobles to escape and even imprisoned the empress dowager all so that I can calm and unite the people. Consequently, their selfish goals can’t be reached so they threaten me with the lives of everyone in the city and the several million pikuls of food in Xingzhou.

I see Song Ruoming’s face has already flushed red with anger and he is glaring at Xu Zong, while Xu Zong has his nose held high like he’s in the right. Since he made his speech, his fellow officials have started whispering amongst themselves, mostly words of agreement. I frown. Moving some people out of the capital? Give me a break. I’m not stupid. As if I don’t know who are actually going to be leaving when the time comes.

These swine may be slow when it comes to work but sure are quick to run for their lives.

I restrain my anger as a sense of powerlessness hits me. Every morning court, I leave pent up with anger. Even a young, healthy man like me would get driven mad by these old farts.

Easy, there. You can’t release your anger just yet, I warn myself and try the hardest to stay calm, to look unflustered and normal. What they want is for me to lose my temper.

I must find a solution for both problems. I clench my jaw as I watch those delighted officials and run through some ideas in my mind.

The grains, no matter who transports them, just need to arrive safely at the capital.

And when I reach this conclusion, I see the answer before me.

“Assistant Administrator Xu, you are over-thinking things.”

Heng Ziyu strides in from the open doors dressed in brightly polished armour.

He performs the rituals before turning to face Xu Zong with a thin smile. “It seems like you have forgotten about the twenty thousand men of mine on the road. They are all well-trained and fit for battle. I am sure they are qualified to escort the transportation of grains.”

Wow, we had the same thing in mind.

Using the retreating forces to escort the transportation wouldn’t delay the retreat, the fees for hiring workers would be saved and the safety of the grains would also be guaranteed. I guess you can call it killing three birds with one stone.

Smiling, I tell the Minister of Revenue, “Ask the Governor of Xingzhou to open the reserves for Marshal Heng’s men to collect and ship to the capital.”

He bows in obedience. Heng Ziyu looks at me with an impressed expression.

“Assistant Administrator Xu is worried for the state and its people and suggested evacuating the commoners to relieve them of the hardships of war. You must find proper places for them.”

The Minister of Revenue bows down to the ground. “This subject thanks Your benevolence on behalf of the people!”

I stand up and shake out my sleeves to leave. “That is enough for today. Marshal Heng, come with **me**.”

The early sunlight coats the palace buildings in vivid colours, making them all the more elegant and dignified. However, it is already approaching the end of autumn so the rays have become weaker and are only scattering loosely in between the *wutong* leaves onto the ground.

“You are still in armour, Marshal.”

He chuckles. “A long time habit, is all.”

We share a smile before looking away. We know very well.

Ever since the moment I gave the orders, we have passed the point of no return. We are going to have to put in our all, whether it be life or death.

“I just took a walk around our city walls and I found quite a few problems.” He sighs, seemingly tired. “Emperor Shun constructed the capital when he founded the country. The walls were all made with solid boulder, eight *zhang*¹³⁶ and six *chi* tall, one *zhang* thick with double layers. The gates were made from steel and the barbicans¹³⁷ have contraptions for fire and water attacks, but over a century has passed without any renovation nor improvement. The weather erosion is fairly serious.”

“Do we have enough time?” I inquire quietly.

He scoffs. “According to scouts, the Yan will arrive at the capital in eight days at the least, ten days at the most. I am afraid it is too late even if we put our lives into repairing it.”

“It does not matter how long, we have to try. Just tell me what it is You need.”

His lips press tightly into a line and his expression is extremely heavy. “What if I need time?”

My heart seems to skip a beat and I can't make a sound.

Even if the Ministry of Works worked day and night, no matter for eight or ten days, it is going to be impossible to restore the walls to its original glory. Heng Ziyu wouldn't say such a thing if this wasn't the case.

I can give him manpower. I can give him food. I can give him horses. I can give him weapons. But I can't give him time.

"How many days can we last under current circumstances?"

He takes a moment before answering. "The Yan cavalry may be fearsome but they cannot just fly over the walls like birds. If my calculations are correct, we can still face our enemies if they attack and we can still last ten to fifteen days. But...after that..."

"It is already October, late autumn. We must hold strong until December. By then it would be winter and the world would be frozen over. Their one hundred sixty thousand men army is going to have a much harder time with supplies than us."

"You are absolutely right, Your Majesty. But in my experience of many years' of battle, the Rui army consists mostly of infantry and will not be able to evenly match cavalry. Additionally, with the outer area lost, cavalry will be restricted so it will not be of help to the defense of the city."

"I have seen Yuwen Yuan, the general of the Blood Mounts. This battle is definitely going to be a tough one if he is involved."

"Yuwen Yuan has a cruel personality, never giving a care about what he cuts down with his sword. I am worried that he will not only make direct attacks with all he has got but also employ low, dirty measures."

He looks at me with a frown, looking quite concerned. I take a deep breath to ease the constricting feeling.

The landscape around the capital is flat and vast so cavalry definitely takes the upper hand. Once the Yan completely surround us, the capital will become a deserted island. If so, more horrors are bound to ensue.

With one glance, we understand it all.

It appears that he still has more to say when Liu An comes rushing to tell me quietly that Master Liao is waiting for me. I start and leave right away.

The inner hall is as gloomy as night and not a trace of sound is present. The maids and attendants have been dismissed and only one small candle has been lit. Master Liao personally brings the person to me. He has been tied up like a mummy and his mouth has been stuffed with cloth. His eyes dart restlessly around.

Master Liao says, "Please be cautious, Your Majesty," and leaves without another word, closing the doors behind him.

"I am the emperor of Rui," I announce as I keep my eyes on him.

He glares at me and I feel the aura of death. I walk up to him and pull the cloth out from his mouth. "I hear you have been searching for someone."

He doesn't answer me but starts laughing instead. "Emperor? You're gonna cry for mommy, too, when His Highness arrives with His army!" He spits at me. "Fucking effeminate piece of shit! Faggot!"

I smile, not losing my temper. "I fully understand why you would say so given our countries' current warring situation. However, it only proves immature to think you could make **me** end your life by upsetting **me** with words."

He shuts up and his eyes start shifting again.

I've heard much worse. His insults are only elementary.

I sit back down calmly, straightening my sleeves. "I hear you have been staying in the capital looking for someone. Is this true?"

He turns his head away as if he couldn't bother.

I chuckle, "Could not find anything on Minister Han's nephew, could you?"

"I am Minister Han's nephew," I enunciate, "Xin is my name."

His eyes goes on stalks and he stares at me with an odd expression.

"You could say Prince Lie and I are old acquaintances." My smile fades. "If you really are His Highness' man and are searching for **me**, say whatever it is you have to say. You would not be disobeying orders doing so."

He keeps his head down for some time before taking a big breath and nodding.

"Indeed, we came to find him. His Highness had given orders to take him out of the city as soon as we find him."

I let my eyelids drop and move my gaze away from him as my heart seems to be squeezed furiously by an invisible hand. Its grip gets tighter and tighter, so tight I can't even breathe.

Of course I understand what this order means. It means the destruction of the capital. It means massacre and bloodshed. It means bare, burnt lands. It also means that he doesn't want me to be in the middle of all that.

I scrutinize the man. "Do you still remember the details of the city's defense?"

He determinedly shakes his head but his eyes show wariness.

Suddenly, I feel fatigue looking at his face—his young face.

"I will take good care of Prince Lie's man and not let you feel one bit of pain."

I walk out in large strides and Master Liao follows me with his head lowered in anticipation of my directions. After some debate, I spit out two coldblooded words.

"Kill him!"

I've never felt so cold, so scared, in the autumn winds of the capital.

To kill or to set free?

Set him free and let him take news of me to him; or kill him to ensure the secrecy of our defenses.

Which is right? And which is wrong?

He would not have sent his people into the city simply to look for me. He's not that kind of person.

If the city had a dozen Yan spies, then it would be vulnerable and its destruction would be imminent no matter how sturdy our walls are or how able our people are.

One side is my country while the other is love. Everything and anything has come down to one point and I finally am forced to make my ultimate choice.

Is love really worthless compared to my responsibility to my country?

Since I've made that decision, he and I can never go back.

I hide my face in my hands and lower my head against the wall, attempting to hide my unkempt and helpless self.

Do you regret it?



The evacuation is currently underway with the help of officials at all levels. The Ministry of Revenue and the Ministry of Defense worked together, not only using the allotted five hundred carts to transport the grains day and night but also urging commoners and the family and friends of the soldiers to head to Xingzhou with their own carts. It was also announced that those who bring back more than twenty pikuls will receive one tael of silver in addition to shipping fees as an incentive.

There are always takers when the stakes are high. The flow of shipments was endless and continued through day and night. In only a few days, several millions of the grains have been shipped to and stored in the capital. Additionally, all soldiers were given half a year's salary in advance. Everyone rejoiced.

The Ministry of Works have assembled artisans of all specialties—wood, soil, tiles, stone—into an engineering team and given training. They have also prepared large amounts of brick, rock, wood, cement and tools for future emergencies. The Minister also arranged for the renovation of the outer walls, strengthening the city gates, especially the An Shun¹³⁸ and An Ding¹³⁹ Gates to the north, the Yong Yang¹⁴⁰ and Bei Zhi¹⁴¹ Gates to the east, changing the material on the inside from soil to brick. The moats have been deepened and the defense patrol has been increased. He also gave orders for windows to be added to the embrasures and wooden spikes to the eastern, western and southern walls to fortify defense even more.

Heng Ziyu is now wholly in charge of the military and has become even busier with training the soldiers and inspecting their living quarters. Meanwhile, I have been consoling the nobles, directing the officials to strengthen our defense. It's been one trivial matter after another. We each have our own work so we haven't been able to discuss the Yan's possible methods of attack.

The Yan spies had sneaked their way into the capital and made an impact on us. I had thought about sending some of our own undercover into the Yan capital. However, when I asked Master Liao if the Eidolons were fit for the job, he shook his head and asked for forgiveness. He said when

my father was still present, the Eidolons were as potent as the sun during midday and had quite a few people undercover, but the Eidolons suffered greatly ever since Father's death and those undercover in Yan could not be reached anymore.

With nowhere else to turn to, I decide to try my luck with Uncle's Wraiths. Uncle has been absent from court in the name of illness ever since I split from the empress dowager, and has not bothered with politics at all. In the few times he did come to court, he didn't say anything. I have to think of some way to get his permission.

Dinner has been served for nearly two hours. I move my gaze from the memorial to the gourmet food but for some reason I don't have any appetite.

Liu An is kneeling before me, quietly begging me to eat even a little. I shoo him away after a short lapse. "Heat the ones that have cooled. Also, fetch Marshal Heng."

After he leaves with my orders, the hall becomes deserted. I return to the memorial. Most of the officials who are still submitting memorials are the ones still clinging on to the relocation, using the empress dowager as their excuse. They write such pretty words that I suspect they are flowers, all being excuses that the empress dowager must leave the capital.

The candlelight shines gently onto the memorial but I am aggravated.

The empress dowager isn't your old lady. Have you people got nothing better to do with your goddamn lives than worrying about her?

Suddenly, the aroma of wine wafts in my nose. I look up to see a beautiful court lady¹⁴² walking towards me holding a jade pot and luminous jade glass¹⁴². She kneels down, pours a glass and holds it out to me.

"Your Majesty, some wine to relieve the stress."

Her voice is crisp and nice to the ears like the black-naped oriole¹⁴³. A lot of the frustration that has built up goes away in an instant. I smile and take the glass.

Liu An might not be that great with his job but sure knows how to please.

I pick up another memorial and just as my lips touch the glass, I unknowingly steal a glance at the lady. She has a delightful smile on her slightly lowered face, looking bashful. What an alluring beauty.

I look back to the memorial. These damn old farts...trying to annoy me to death...

"Better drink it before it gets cold, Your Majesty," she says in her captivating voice and edges closer to the desk. I chuckle and take a few sips. I take another glance at her. She looks kind of familiar from the side, kind of like someone...

Something resurfaces from the old memories...

I throw the glass away. "Who are you?!" I demand.

Before I finish, I see a cold flash before my eyes. The lady breaks out like a loaded spring, drawing a red iron¹⁴⁵ dagger. Well acquainted with the aura of death, I immediately jump up and kick the desk, hitting her in the waist. She grunts but leaps for me nonetheless.

Briskly, I back up. The layered dress slows my steps. Suddenly, my vision blurs and I feel light on my feet as if I am going to fall down.

“You foolish ruler! I’m gonna avenge my family!”

The gleaming blade rushes towards me along with her furious shouts. I feel limp and when I see the snowy white metal flashing dangerously close, I pivot and it scrapes by me. I grab onto her arm and twist. She yelps out in pain but lunges forth with all her might. I feel a cold breeze by my ear; I think the blade almost touched it.

I put more force into my grip and as she screams in pain, I too feel an acute pain in my arms. I can’t move anymore as though I’ve been drained of energy.

The wine...it must be the wine.

She crawls up painstakingly, bloody all over, and comes towards me.

“One hundred fifty-something people. They owed you nothing but you were coldblooded enough to kill and exile them. You devil!”

I pant while propping myself up. “No wonder you looked familiar. You...Xie...”

She snickers. “Say what you have to say in hell!”

Then she raises her dagger and brings it down towards me.

Fucking hell. I’ve made it through the roughest seas only to have my ship sink in a tiny, little gutter.

I’m limp and powerless. All I can do is lie on the ground, waiting for death. I close my eyes and in that final moment, Murong Yu’s figure flits in front of my mind’s eye.

His dark, enigmatic gaze remains as though melted into my flesh.

Everything becomes still.

Then an ear-splitting crack, not unlike that of breaking bones.

I open my eyes to see blood welling out of the lady’s mouth and her pale, almost transparent face. Her body falls limply on to the ground.

There is a person moving. “Guards! There’s an assassin!”

The next moment, I’m in that person’s arms. Heng Ziyu rips open my sleeve to reveal a long wound from my elbow to wrist. Blood is dripping out, soaking the sleeve red.

I feel my consciousness slipping. I want to sleep.

“Your Majesty?!” He squeezes my hand forcefully and barks in the other direction, “What’re you waiting for? Go get the doctor!”

I clench my teeth to keep myself awake. “Summon Pei Yuan to increase the number of Guardians guarding the palace and to close the palace gates. Summon the Dalisi¹⁴⁶ Minister to search for any accomplices. Do not spare any!”

Heng Ziyu helps me to my throne as the court doctor comes running in. When the attendants take off my outer robes, the wound gets tugged too and an unbearable pain shoots through me. After the emergency care, my head starts to clear up. The doctor kneels down and explains cautiously, “Reporting to Your Majesty, there was a numbing poison in the wine that takes effect immediately after consumption. That was why You had felt limp and dizzy.”

I take the tea and sip some to calm my nerves. I take a glimpse at the lady. “Is she dead?”

“The injuries are critical. Broken wrist. Probably will not last much longer.”

“As long as she is not dead now.”

I dismiss the attendants and the doctor, giving strict orders for secrecy. At once, the huge hall is empty save for me, Heng Ziyu, Liu An and the unconscious woman.

Shakily, Liu An flattens himself on the ground and explains the situation in the inner palace.

In Great Rui, most of the women chosen to serve in the palace come from high-class families. This court lady is a child born to one of the concubines of the Xie household and has been with the empress dowager for a very long time. The empress dowager experienced trauma and has been away recuperating and the Xie household's punishment didn't include her; she only got sent to the needlework department. They didn't think things would become like this.

My head starts aching so I rub my temples as I think.

Xie's daughter is only the tip of the iceberg of the various forces in the palace. In this unimaginably huge royal palace, there is no way she could have done this without any outside help. I've imprisoned the empress dowager, impeached high-ranking officials, chosen to face the Yan and promoted many martial officials and *jinshi*. This has been the complaint of many officials and nobles but they are too scared to say no to my face and instead have done much more in the dark.

There are many women like her who remain loyal to officials or nobles while living in the inner palace. That day, I had taken back the apparent power but I haven't yet cleansed through the inner palace. And this is what led to the incident today.

The woman lets out a moan as she comes to. When she spots me, her eyes fill with hatred.

“Foolish king, you were lucky today but don't you forget, you're going to die a pathetic death!”

Heng Ziyu's face darkens and he barks, “Watch your mouth!”

She laughs with a mouthful of bloody foam. “Am I wrong to say so? Once the Yan break through the city, you're all going to die!” Then she glares at Heng Ziyu. “You're just a petty commoner, yet you dare hold yourself so highly.”

Holding back the fury, I speak calmly, “Do you have any accomplices? If you tell **me**, I can spare your life.”

She struggles to sit up a little taller and lies on the ground laughing. “I take the responsibility of my own deeds. I'll take whatever it is you have waiting for me!”

Heng Ziyu scoffs and looks to me. Our eyes meet and I begin to hatch an idea.

Normally, these people conceal themselves extremely well, but since this happened already, why don't I make it look bigger than it is and use this assassination as an opportunity to cleanse the inner palace? I could also get rid of the nobles and even the empress dowager...as long as I want to.

I stop smiling and tell her coldly, “Then **I** hope you are certain you can bear the Dalisi's interrogation.”

She looks up with a shocked expression and the colour drains from her face.

The Dalisi is in charge of judicial matters in the palace and are known for their cruel and unforgiving methods. Whoever enters their care would lead a life worse than death.

Her figure suddenly springs up right before my eyes. She runs towards the nearest pillar and rams her head on it. Her skull cracks and she falls to the floor.

The two of us gasp in surprise. Heng Ziyu quickly lunges forth and pulls her up by the shoulder.

Blood snakes down slowly from her forehead. She gazes at me with a wide grin. “The dead won’t say a thing.”

I snicker and step down from my throne, stopping beside her. Her pupils are already enlarging; she’s on her last breath.

I lift her head up by the chin and flash a cold smile. “The dead won’t say a thing. But they could also say anything.”

¹³⁴ The name of an ancient marsh that was already filled up in the Han Dynasty. Present day Xingyang, Henan.

¹³⁵ This was an unofficial position implemented to lessen the prime minister’s power.

¹³⁶ A *zhang* is ten *chi*. One *chi* is about 25cm-30cm.

¹³⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_city_wall#Barbican

¹³⁸ 安順 (*an1 shun4*), literally ‘peace docility.’

¹³⁹ 安定 (*an1 ding4*), literally ‘peace settlement.’

¹⁴⁰ 永陽 (*yong3 yang1*), literally ‘eternal sun.’

¹⁴¹ 北直 (*bei1 zhi2*), literally ‘north straight.’

¹⁴² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady-in-waiting#Korea_.28Joseon.29

¹⁴³ A specialty product of Jiuquan, Gansu Province. It is a wine vessel made of jade and appears translucent when filled with wine and placed under the moonlight. For more information: http://www.chinaculture.org/classics/2010-03/31/content_375203.htm

¹⁴⁴ The Chinese name is literally “yellow nightingale.”

¹⁴⁵ A fictional alloy in wuxia. The metal is said to be close to black in colour with a slight red gleam, extremely dense with a high melting point, magnetic, and a blade made of this can slice through iron as though it was mud.

¹⁴⁶ The highest judicial institution in the palace.

XXIX: Heartless

Fully armed Golden Guardians burst into Yong An Palace and subdue the defenseless maids and eunuchs, kicking them out and forcing them to kneel down in submission. The blazing torches illuminate the desolate night at the palace. The Guardians declare loudly that those who get in the way will be killed before breaking into the side hall, turning over anything they can.

I'm watching all this from the courtyard with an emotionless expression.

I could have chosen not to come but I did anyway.

The racket by the doors abruptly stops. The Guardians slowly back up and a figure in white emerges, elegant and dignified. She stands there alone as the empress dowager of Great Rui.

She walks towards me with a smile, the red torchlight making her face appear eerily pale.

"Apologies for disturbing Your Graciousness' rest."

She keeps smiling at me. A hint of senility rests between her brows. I bow respectfully. "The winds are strong at night. It would be better for You to return indoors to avoid catching a cold."

"Your Majesty, You just want this old bag of bones to die, don't You?"

"I dare not. I did not want to disturb Your Graciousness either but the court lady comes from Yong An Palace. I was wary of accomplices in hiding so I took the initiative to search the palace. I beg Your pardon."

I straighten my posture and raise an arm, and the Guardians rush into the main hall, making a loud clamour.

Maid Xiu is behind the empress dowager, her lips tightly pursed and gaze restless.

"Your Majesty really has grown up." The empress dowager flashes an eerie smile.

My arm starts aching. I do my best to hold in the overwhelming anguish. "I thank You for the praise. I was just worried for Your safety."

She doesn't respond but instead reaches out for my cheek. The guard beside me shoots forth and unsheathes his sword. I quickly stop him and look back at her. There is affection in her eyes all of a sudden. "If only...you haven't..."

"I saw you shortly after Jinrong gave birth to you. Just a little baby giggling, swaddled, like a cute snowball. You were just so adorable."

I bite my lips and don't make a sound.

"I suppose it happens to everyone. You grow up and don't behave anymore." She laughs, "You're the same. Who would have thought such a harmless child could become the almighty emperor."

Her nails dig a little into my skin. It's not too deep but it hurts a lot.

I don't want my hands to be stained with the blood of my relatives. I just want to strip her of her power, take it back from the maternal branch.

"Say, Xin, your parents both died because of **me**. Did you ever hate **me** for it?" Sighing, she tilts her head up and her eyes fill with tears.

Shakily, I reply, "I did but everyone has their reasons. Plus, if it were not for You **I** would not have lived until now. **I** suppose we are even."

Her face contorts and quivers. She quickly lowers her face as the tears break free. "The sons of Lin could never be puppets. 'Tis the blood of the emperor!"

Her expression is warm like a tender mother but there is also a gloomy glint in her face.

"The ancients said, one may raise a fierce tiger and bid it to eat others but not to guard one's own yard." Her tone is full of despair. "I was wrong. **I** was wrong to raise a man-eating tiger and wrong to let it devour **me**."

Every single one of her words grates my ears and stabs into my heart.

I draw away from her, keeping my eyes on her aging complexion while suppressing the anguish. Her eyes are slightly red but she has a smile on her face. "I have heard about what you have done. You are indeed Duke Zhao Rui's son and have not put the royal blood in you to shame."

I chuckle, my voice already having recovered. "I am the emperor. **I** naturally have to live up to expectations. **I** must take up the responsibility for everyone.

Then I stroll over to her, gazing at her. "You have lost, Empress Dowager."

She looks at me as though I were a stranger. Her eyes dim.

"Yes," she laughs, still elegant and graceful. "I have lost. **I** was destined to since the moment **I** let you live."

I smile bitterly. Destiny. It's all destiny. Everyone says so.

"The future of Great Rui lies within Your hands. Your Majesty, You must take back our national pride and clear the shame with blood!"

She drops her gaze slightly and continues in her ashen voice, "Your era has begun."

I back away and stay there. I say in my usual voice, "I am Your grand-nephew. At least You lost to family."

She shakes all over and her eyes lose focus. She falls limp and Maid Xiu rushes to catch her. I raise a hand and a few maids quickly walk over to help her. With the help of the maids, the empress dowager heads back into the hall while laughing, sounding empty and melancholy like a dry river.

Maid Xiu gazes at me with teary eyes and bows down. I try to bring her up but she shakes her head and kneels down.

“Maid Xiu, You watched **me** grow up. Although our statuses are divided, You are **my** elder, nonetheless. Say what it is that You have to say.”

“This old lady begs Your Majesty. The empress dowager is along in years. She cannot bear any more distress. I hope You see it in Your heart to let Her Graciousness enjoy the rest of Her life.”

“**I** will,” I sigh. “The budget for the empress dowager’s palace will stay the same. May She rest well.”



That night, all personnel from Yong An Palace was arrested and put under investigation by the Dalisi.

The daughter of Xie had already died when I told the Dalisi what her intentions were. The dead tell no tales. Therefore, she has become a chess piece I can fully utilise. The accomplices of whom she had “accused” before dying—the needlework department, dining department and a few high-ranking maids and eunuchs—all were scared witless.

Before the Dalisi actually start interrogating, the prisoners have already gone frantic, accusing each other of crimes and causing a ruckus as if outing others would bring themselves a chance at life. More and more people are getting involved, bringing every single palace, every department into the ordeal. The number of related personnel keeps increasing as book after book of names are given to me. The whole inner palace is in pandemonium now.

Master Liao stands beside me, arms hanging casually by his side. I flip through the list filled with names of those in the higher levels, many of which have much relation with the officials and nobles.

After some deliberation, I close the book and instruct the Dalisi Minister, “Look into their family relations and report back immediately if you find any related to Assistant Administrator, Xu Zong.”

He leaves with my orders. Master Liao has a stern expression. “Is Your Majesty going to get the court involved in the assassination incident?”

I look up at him and throw these words out, “The war is imminent. **I** do not want any more problems but if **I** do not set the record straight, there will always be disobedient people. Xu Zong must die.”

A shudder runs through him and then he quickly bows. “Very wise, Your Majesty.”

Rather wrongly kill one thousand than let one get away.

The Dalisi searches through the families of those in the list and finds that the head of the dining department is a distant relative on the maternal side of Xu Zong’s. Under my instruction, the attempted assassination of a court lady becomes a conspiracy that nobles have planned against the new emperor. The disloyal heart of a subject is strictly forbidden and with hard evidence, the

Ministry of Justice arrests Xu Zong's entire family and sentences them to public execution in two days. The rest of the convicts are all people I have wanted to get rid of and are exiled or degraded, never to recover their rights. All the elite have become prisoners paraded before the curious public in chains and shackles on their way to the distant frontier.

One incident of treachery has purged the field of the empress dowager's pieces, impeached senior officials, gotten high and low ranking servants in the inner palace involved and set the record straight once and for all. Anyone who had been against fighting back, who had spoken out against me, who had said ill of the martial class and who had encouraged the nobles to be rebellious have all been purged.

If they can talk behind my back about my low upbringing, I don't see why I can't use low, shameful strategies to knock some sense into these snotty elite.

In less than four days, all sentences have been carried out. It is as if a mighty storm whipped through the palace and court. No one dare question my supreme power anymore.



One autumn shower brings one cold spell¹⁴⁷.

After lunch, I'm in the hall listening to the crisp sounds of the autumn raindrops hitting the palace steps.

Liu An reports for the third time that Uncle is still kneeling outside the palace requesting a summon, and asks me if he should summon him. I stay quiet and turn to look out the window at the gloomy sky. In the end, I wave my hand in agreement.

After a short period of silence, Uncle kneels down before me and bows low, touching his head to the ground. I inquire casually, "How is your illness, Archduke?"

"I thank Your Majesty for the concern. I am fine now." His court uniform is dripping wet with rain.

I don't blink an eye. "You have been absent from court due to illness for quite some time, Minister. What brings you to the palace today?"

"I have a favour to ask, Your Majesty. I implore that You grant it."

"Speak."

Uncle is still lying on the ground and his head has not been lifted once. His voice sounds slightly muffled. "I am along in years and not fit to serve the country anymore. I hope You may grant me retirement and allow me to return home¹⁴⁸."

I stiffen but quickly regain my composure. "Are you not fit or are you not willing?" I ask with a smile.

He quivers while I continue, "You need not worry, Minister Han. I may be ruthless but I will not harm my relatives." He lifts his head up a little. "I fully understand your request but the Han are

the head of the court. What am **I** to do if the others make the same request after **I** allow you to return home?"

"Your Majesty, I do not have any other requests. I simply wish to spend the rest of my life in peace."

I don't want to talk in circles with Uncle. "Perhaps you are not pleased with **me** because of what happened to the empress dowager? Or maybe, Uncle, you are shedding crocodile tears for those convicts?"

He drops his head again, reluctant to answer.

"A word of advice, Uncle. It would be wisest to be content with the present if you still want the best for the Han clan."

I'm being very clear with him. If he retires, it means admitting the defeat of the Han clan and shaming the family name. It doesn't matter if he is furious or hopeless, he must remain as Archduke of Jing, keep the title of minister and endure the pity and ridicule of those around him.

This is my punishment. The kindest and cruelest punishment.

"Your Majesty, I—" I spot despair on his face before he flattens down to the ground, begging.

I smirk. Hiding really is the easiest way.

I interrupt him, my smile fading away, "Another word of advice, Uncle. When the empress dowager loses her power, she will still be the empress dowager but when an official loses his power, there is no guarantee that he will still be an official."

Hearing this, Uncle starts and freezes on the spot, staring dumbly at me. I look back at him steadily and after a while, he drops his head down to the ground once more.

"I understand."

While dismissing him, I add, "Minister Han, ask the chief of the Wraiths to come see **me** tonight."

I'm alone once more and the pain on my arm becomes evident again. A fearsome feeling of loneliness rises within, wraps itself around me along with the gloominess and creepiness of the palace and threatens to wash me away.

Emperors really are solitary people. Always plotting and calculating. No family. No friends. Only pawns and enemies.

My chest starts stinging with pain. I lower my head as the looming ceiling starts coming down on me, suffocating me.

High and mighty, isolated and lonely, companionless...

I'm afraid I am also bloodthirsty and ruthless now.

I've only come to understand why Emperor Wen had said: "Good...even if **I**...were to be a human next time...**I** don't want...to be born a royalty."

The house of the emperor, the residence of the son of heaven, is actually the most inhospitable. So much so that it can turn a healthy person to an insane maniac.

I've already changed and I can never go back.

After the assassination, the number of guards has increased significantly with sentries posted every few yards or so. The security is almost as heavy as the time of my ascension.

I do have to thank Heng Ziyu for that day. If he hadn't come in time and wounded the woman, I probably won't be here worrying about how to defend the capital.

I owe another favour. How frustrating.

Monetary debts are easy to get rid of but debts like these, not so much.

"Your Majesty?"

Just as I'm massaging my temples out of frustration, his sudden utterance startles me. I look up to clash with his inquiring gaze. At once, I realise that my mind was wandering again.

"A headache, Your Majesty?"

I nod a little as the stinging amplifies. It's probably an after-effect of falling down the steps of Yong An Palace when I was young. My head would hurt incredibly whenever I try to concentrate on an issue.

The court doctors couldn't come up with anything and just reiterated peaceful rest.

Peaceful rest. Sure sounds easy.

The imminent war, the evacuation of the commoners, the upheaval in the palace; I need to rack my brain for all of these.

I shake my head. "It is fine. I am listening. Continue, please, Marshal."

Heng Ziyu lets go of the military defense map and keeps his gaze on me. "Is it because of a lack of sleep? Perhaps I should call the doctor?"

I wave my hand. "I will not be able to read a simple defense map once those doctors come. I said it is fine. Continue, please."

Our eyes go back to the huge map. The detailed descriptions upon it illustrates the length, width, and thickness of the city walls, the number of crenels, the layout of contraptions and personnel and even the hypsographical features of the land around the capital.

"According to the scouts' reports, the Yan vanguards have already reached here and will arrive at the city in three days."

"It is the Lupine Blood Mounts. Yuwen Yuan must be eager to please."

"We must hit where it hurts. If we can dampen their spirits before the main troops get here, I believe we can boost the morale of our own."

I look up at him. It doesn't look like he was joking.

My stomach tightens. "The Blood Mounts specialise in speed and are strong in both offense and defense. If we want to get the upper hand, I think we have to set up ambush beforehand. But will it not be impractical to do so on this vast stretch of flat plains?"

He looks determined. "We need to catch them off guard. It would only be more difficult when their main troops get here."

"The art of war states: 'if ten times the enemy's strength, surround them'¹⁴⁹. If ones' forces number ten times the enemy's, one may choose to fence the enemies in. Forty thousand Blood Mounts are racing towards the capital now. We have nowhere near the amount to do so."

“As a person who does not play by the rules, Your Majesty should not bother with what the art of war says.” He smirks and slaps his hand on the map. “The Yan will think we have retreated back into the safety of the city, too afraid to fight, and would not expect us to attack instead. If I may make a suggestion, get twenty thousand men to set up ambush on the path that they are bound to take and cut them off from the rest of the forces to dampen their spirits!”

“Twenty thousand...but these twenty thousand men would be fated to die!” I say through clenched teeth.

“We give some to gain some. Your Majesty, when their entire army gets here, it would take much more than twenty thousand men!”

I turn to the map again. He doesn’t talk and keeps on watching me.

Every one of Heng Ziyu’s words is so well-reasoned that I can’t say anything.

It would be the same as me giving up Xie Yun and Xu Zong in exchange for the unification of the court.

I look back up and ask slowly, “And who would lead the twenty thousand men?”

His eyes darken. “Xu Zheng.”

I nod as he explains, “Xu Zheng is skilled in attacking cavalry and dealt a heavy blow to the Yan in the Battle of Sparrowhawk Ravine. Afterwards, he has been defending South Hill Pass. He knows the enemy well and is the best man for the job.”

“Those twenty thousand men are not coming back and that might be the same for General Xu as well. Can You really bear parting with Your beloved general?”

Heng Ziyu’s eyes burn brightly and his words allow for no compromise. “The death of some is for the peace in the future, so that more can live on.”

That’s right. Everything we’re doing is not only for ourselves but also for others, and even more so for the future, the future of the realm.



I stroll along on the walls, the limestone beneath my feet are uneven. The soldiers are fully armed and the fires burn loudly. I can hear the orderly steps and clanging of armour of the patrols below me. For a moment, I feel as if I’ve gone back to the armybase again.

I gaze to the north. The sky is a gloomy spread, the setting sun trying desperately to illuminate it with its final rays while descending slowly. The evening glow dyes the clouds with colour, adding some brilliance to the boundless plains.

“What You have done to these men is truly impressive, Marshal. Before, these soldiers were all slothful but at least now they look proper.”

“The military has its own set of rules,” he replies with a light smile.

“Would You care to whip the Golden Guardians into shape for me?”

I'm wearing black regular attire and the regular crown to allow movement. He has on a black helmet with a white feather and a sword in hand. He holds himself up high while walking shoulder to shoulder with me.

"I'm going to have to refuse. The Guardians are all sons from a high background. They might start saying that the martial people are interfering with politics again," he chuckles casually. "The only person who can keep them in check now is You, Your Majesty."

I glance sideways at him. "Are You saying I have shed too much blood?"

His smile fades. "You have done no wrong, Your Majesty."

I look down as a wave of sadness wells up in my chest.

No one will say that anything I've done is wrong; I'm always right. No one will tell me their real thoughts and no one will care out of sincerity. Their submission to me is all because of the power I hold in my hands.

And no one will ever call my name again. Only two cold words will come out of their mouth.
Your Majesty.

A brisk wind blows past, whisking sand into the air and colouring the sky yellow. The scene before me melts into the dusky yellow evening.

"Allegedly, everywhere the Lupine Blood Mounts traverse becomes buried in several inches of sand," he says, as though to himself.

"And their helmets are all red from the blood of their slain enemies," I add.

"Yuwen Yuan is merciless. I think it would be best to make other preparations."

"You mean...?"

"Fire, water source, escalade."

I think to myself, Heng Ziyu and I are becoming more and more like-minded. He only needs to say a few words for me to understand him.

The showers have stopped and the autumn air is dry. There are many trees on the plains and they are easily flammable. It would be the best time to attack with fire.

Water source—the capital's water comes from the mountain ranges to the northeast. If the Yan were to build canals and flood the capital with river water, the food would go bad and the soldiers would be fatigued; if they cut off the water, we would suffer from thirst. Either way, it's going to be tough for us.

Escalade—the Yan footmen are also adept at combat. As long as they capture one of the gates and let the cavalry in, we would have to engage in urban warfare.

I feel my temples stinging with pain again. What, are we supposed to cut all the trees down and send soldiers to guard the water source and...

I shake my head. There's enough for me to worry about in the city. Really now...

My body sways a bit and Heng Ziyu quickly grabs my arm. "Your Majesty?"

I feel a dizzy spell hit me. It's probably because I didn't sleep enough last night. I smile bitterly. I haven't had a single good night's sleep for the last two weeks.

I force my eyes to open to see Heng Ziyu's worried eyes. I flash my usual smile.

“No need to fret, Marshal,” I say as I discreetly pull my arm back. “I still have some matters to attend to. I shall leave this place under Your care.”

I’ve only taken several steps when he speaks in that low voice of his. “Your Majesty.”

“Yes, Marshal?” I turn my head back a little.

“I beg that You take care of Yourself.” The corners of his lips curve upwards in what might be concern. “The nation depends on Your holy health.”

I chortle and leave without responding.

No one would have said that to me when I was still a punk. The nation depends on my health. All that those people care about is the country. Only the country.



The emperor always has a lot of work. The memorials on the desk have piled into a small hill.

I push the lump away and lie onto the table, the drowsiness coming to me soon after. A breeze pushes in from outside and the cold invades me, denying me sleep.

I start to reminisce about the feeling of being in Murong Yu’s arms. His embrace is soft and plushy like a pillow and it’s nice and cozy. It makes me feel like I’m being loved.

Whatever. What’s the point of reminiscing now?

Really, it’s probably better to not meet again at this point.

I repress the torment and push myself back up. After sniffing a few times, I bring the lump of memorials back and start reading them. Not only read, I still have to personally write comments for each one.

Time trickles past. I hear the soft steps of servants walking by. Aside from that and the even fainter sound of the water clock, the room is dead silent. When daylight ends, Liu An lights the lamps and the attendants serve dinner. I have no appetite so I dismiss them after picking at the food.

I have already given lots of thought about the Wraiths while reading the memorials. I must look one way and row another.

It’s already late at night when the chief Wraith gets here. Dressed in black, his kneeling figure almost blends into the background.

“Are you willing to swear loyalty to **me**?” I ask coolly.

I cannot see his expression because he is on the floor and his voice sounds monotonous. “As a Wraith, I have sworn to never betray my master.”

How loyal. I chuckle. “How fortunate the Hans are to have such a loyal subordinate. But first, look up.”

He lifts his head up slowly and surprise flashes in his eyes when he sees me.

“Do you recognise **me**?”

He lowers his head again and answers in a quiet voice. "Your Majesty used to be Minister Han's..." His voice trails off at the end.

I smile a little. "Good," I say as my mind clears up. "Since you know, then... You are unwilling to betray your master but obeying **me** would not count, would it?"

He quickly looks back up, his eyes dancing with inquiry. I stop smiling. "Within **me** flows the blood of Han. It will not count as betraying your master if you are loyal to **me**."

"If you do not comply... The laws of Great Rui state that officials are not allowed to have forces of their own. Hmmph." I peer at him out of the corner of my eye. I tap on the table, the clear sounds echoing through the empty building.

After a long time, he finally kowtows. "Your orders, please, Your Majesty."

Not so stubborn after all.

Great Rui laws do not allow subjects to have secret forces. The Wraiths have only been able to exist because of the Han clan's protection for all these years. Now that the Han clan has fallen, it would be quite silly if he still clung onto his loyalty.

I cough quietly. "Can you infiltrate the Yan capital?"

He nods. "In reply to Your Majesty, we can."

"Excellent," I speak after a slight moment of faltering. "The Yan emperor is said to be ill and the second and third prince are secretly plotting to usurp the throne. **I** want you to sneak into there and get **me** the most reliable news. Contact **me** through pigeon post as soon as you catch wind of anything."

"And Your intentions are...?"

I snicker. "Since the Yan want to play, **I** thought, why not make the odds higher and get everyone involved?"

He looks shocked for a moment before lowering his head. I leave him a few more reminders and dismiss him.

With his illness, the Yan emperor would not oversee every single matter. The second and third prince have long been discontent with the amount of love he has been giving Murong Yu so it's only expected that they would act while he is sick and Murong Yu is not in the capital. The second prince likes money and the third prince likes sex. It doesn't matter which one I target, he will certainly take the bait as long as he has desires.

Not to mention, Murong Yu is the biggest obstruction to them getting the throne. Once he returns victorious, he is sure to be glorified and receive even more praise and love from the emperor. The throne might just become his reward. The influential left minister in the capital and the soldiers who accompanied him through bloodshed would surely become strong supports for Murong Yu's fight for the throne.

The second and third prince would surely not want to see that happening.

My enemy's enemy is my friend.

I let out a deep breath and start feeling disgust towards myself.

Calculating and plotting every step of the way, abandoning my true self, becoming heartless, becoming coldblooded, tirelessly disposing of anyone who gets in my way.

And that includes the love of my life.


In the dark, gloomy palace hall, I tilt my head back and feel the warm fluids drip down my face.

¹⁴⁷ This is a saying that originated from the farming community: the cold air from Siberia and Mongolia blows down to China and meets with the warm air in the south to create showers. Meanwhile, a drop in temperature accompanies each shower.

¹⁴⁸ Most officials do not come from the capital but must reside there to serve their duty. Normally, residence is provided by the government. They are allowed to return home after retirement or for emergencies such as deaths in the family.

¹⁴⁹ Taken directly from a translation of *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. <https://www.sonshi.com/original-the-art-of-war-translation-not-giles.html>

XXX: Extra-I Love You

*uyun comes wearing a red and black *quju* dress with her hands clasped* Happy New Years everyone...

Countless eggs, bricks and tomatoes come flying You evil stepmom¹⁵⁰! No more angst for Xin and Yu! We want fluff! We want happy ending!

Muyun gets out a pot lid for protection Erm... *wipes sweat* At this celebratory time of the year, I would like to give my season's greetings to everyone. Wish everyone and their families a happy new year. Wish all your wishes will come true and for money to keep coming in. And now I would like to present an extra for everyone as a new year's gift.

Special disclaimer: This extra takes place in an unspecified universe and unknown location. The characters stay the same but you can just pretend the supporting characters like Heng Ziyu, Yuwen Yuan and Xiao Qinyun never existed.

Heng Ziyu rages I must protect His Majesty!


Xiao Qinyun whines I don't care. I wanna be with my darling Yu!

Muyun glowers, beats the two unconscious and drags them away by the collar

P.S: To avoid confusion, Xin will still be called Han Xin.

Muyun dabs tears The guy I liked in senior high was named 'Xin' as well.

No-strings-attached Extra – I Love You

iny, faint snowflakes had been drifting in the sky, hitting the branches with soft thuds. The yard that had been swept clean had become a white field of jade once more. An icy draft attempted to push past the windows but got blocked by thick drapes. The room was insulated and the carpets were heated so one would not feel the slightest chill.

It was one of the coldest days in the year¹⁵¹ and though it was freezing outside, inside the room it was as warm as spring.

Murong Yu got up lazily from the brocade blankets and gently pulled his arm out from under the person beside him before moving it around. He smiled while leaning down after the numbness

went away and planted a light kiss on his forehead. The person snuggled closer to him with a soft grunt as if he had felt it but his eyes remained shut. Murong Yu pushed the hair off his forehead and began to examine his face.

A faint pink blush floated on his fair cheeks. His eyes were closed while his lashes rose and fell along with each breath. A ghost of a smile spread on Murong Yu's face as he reached for the man's face and then traced all the way down along his slender neckline, past the neck and chest dotted with love bites, stopping stop at the waist.

The blueish, purplish marks were all evidence of their sweet love last night—a sign that only belonged to him.

The smile on his face deepened by the second, and his strong brows were slouching lazily like a relaxed person, making him look warmer.

The bedroom was absolutely silent save for the sounds from the red candlelight flooding it. Han Xin always needed light to sleep. Murong Yu had asked him why, to which he shrugged carelessly, saying he didn't like the dark. The speaker might not have meant much, but the listener sure read between the lines. Murong Yu had immediately called to mind the time he had had a nightmare in his arms. After that, the candles stayed lit every night in their bedroom.

A loving emotion rising from within, he put his arm around Han Xin and began to study him again, from the corner of his eyes to his lashes, from his nose bridge to his mouth, again and again, until his gaze finally fixated on those slightly parted lips.

All those maddening moans came from this place right here.

Recalling the ecstasy last night, he felt as though a fire had been lit from his chest down to his abdomen. He was breathing harder and harder while the desires in his heart multiplied. All he wanted to do is suck on those moist, petal-like lips, wake him up by the kiss, enter him, and make him feel his passion.

Just when Murong Yu was about to give up all rational thought and initiate action, the person in his arms suddenly rolled over, wrapping the brocade blanket around himself before slumbering again. Only then did Murong Yu remember that Han Xin disliked continuing affairs in the morning. After much deliberation, he got out of bed after planting a kiss on his forehead.

Picking up and putting on the long-sleeve shirt from the ground, Murong Yu walked to the windows and lifted up a corner of the drapes. A gust of cold wind pushed in, making him shiver. He touched the bits of snow stuck on the windowsill and felt the cool wetness. He couldn't help but smile, thinking, this feels just like his skin, like the highest quality silk, smooth beyond comparison. While he thought he glanced over to Han Xin who was still sleeping soundly.

After being together for so long and facing so many hardships, the happiness that they had didn't come easy at all. The two understood and shared each other's wish to stay together for life. To be able to be together would be the best thing in the world, even if they did not have wealth or power.

However, Murong Yu still felt a bit unsatisfied.

And that is the fact that Han Xin never said those three words.

Not even at the most passionate and delirious moments in bed.

He felt very depressed all of a sudden. Why hadn't Han Xin said it yet? Had he not done well enough?

Han Xin actually had already woken up when Murong Yu touched his cheeks but the warmth of the bed made him reluctant to open his eyes. Not to mention there was a free massage from a tender hand so he took advantage of the opportunity.

He could feel Murong Yu getting off the bed and, after a while, hear his quiet sigh. Only then did Han Xin blink open his eyes. He only sat up for a moment before the cold air made him retreat back into the blanket. He rubbed his eyes and saw Murong Yu's tall silhouette in front of the window. Han Xin put on some clothes and shuffled over barefoot while glimpsing Murong Yu's downcast expression.

Out of nowhere, he felt his heart ache.

He drew near and hugged him around the shoulders before waiting for Murong Yu's reaction. Resting his chin on his shoulder blade, he kept rubbing his face on his neck and kissed it from time to time.

"It's windy here. Don't just stand there zoning out," Han Xin said as he let the drapes down again.

Murong Yu turned around and hooked his arms around Han Xin's waist, looking at his cheeks that were still pink from just having woken up. "So early today. What's the special occasion?" he joked.

Han Xin shot him a dirty look and pursed his lips. "As if I could be an early-riser when *someone* always goes straight to sleep after making me suffer all night!"

Murong Yu just smiled at his apparent discontent and pulled him closer into his arms. Han Xin was only wearing a thin, white pajama robe that was undone. His skin that was as fair as jade was spotted with alluring, red marks.

"When have I ever not been gentle with you?" Murong Yu asked as he reached up and touched the man's lips, caressing them. With that, Han Xin just let himself go limp in his arms and reached into Murong Yu's robe with his right hand, massaging.

"But still you can't just start whenever--"

Murong Yu suddenly grabbed his wrist and glared at him, warning, "Xin, looks like you don't want to leave the bed today."

Han Xin's reaction was very enigmatic. He answered with a light smile, "Hmm? You mean...?"

Before he could finish, Murong Yu ducked down and sealed those red lips that he had been craving. Han Xin faltered for a moment before hooking his arms around Murong Yu's neck.

Han Xin felt Murong Yu sucking on his tongue and stirring the inside of his mouth, his tongue sweeping over his teeth and the sensitive roof of his mouth. Their tongues entangled with each other, fervently gyrating. Their breathing became rough and heated.

Murong Yu's hands were busy, too, ripping off the belt on Han Xin's robe, reaching in for his lean, sturdy waist and continuously kneading it. Han Xin let out a muffled grunt which aroused him even more; the fiery passion that had just disappeared seemed to be lit up again. It burned even brighter and hotter, to the point that Murong Yu could no longer suppress his urges.

He slid his hands down to play with the two elastic, round globes. Han Xin tried to break away from his lips to catch his breath but Murong Yu pursued his lips relentlessly, not allowing him to leave.

Murong Yu only let go after a smoldering long kiss. Han Xin's face had become bright red, his starry eyes slightly closed and hair tousled. Murong Yu couldn't begin to describe the attraction he felt towards the man.

Murong Yu's hand lingered on his hairless chest, gently kneading the nipples which soon hardened. He teased in Han Xin's ear, "Xin, it's a bother to stand. Why don't we move to the bed?" In the meanwhile, his other hand that was holding Han Xin by the waist kept rubbing his butt cheeks. The silky skin felt absolutely wonderful.

A fire had already started to burn from within Han Xin. The nipples that were being played with by Murong Yu, which had been slightly sore, were now starting to feel pleasure. Heat has rushed down to his abdomen too and is looking for release after the lightest caressing by Murong Yu.

"No." He loosened his arms from Murong Yu's neck and spotted the overwhelming lust that had accumulated in his eyes. "I wanted to bathe after getting up."

"Oh?" Murong Yu glanced meaningfully at him before flashing a wide grin. "You mean you want to bathe with me?"

"Can you not be horny for just one second?" Han Xin pushed his hand away and fixed his robe. Just as he tried to walk away, Murong Yu pulled him back by the waist.

He puckered his lips and kissed the corners of his lips. "I know you're worn out from last night so I'll take care of everything today."

Turning around the corner of the corridor, Murong Yu lifted the veils and a hot cloud of steam came rushing forth. Speedily, he stripped Han Xin and himself. The two soaked themselves in the spring water; the warmth encircled and pampered them.

Han Xin was already dizzy from Murong Yu's treatment so he just let himself slump onto his shoulders and let his lover scoop the water up and wash him. Seeing the fine body before him, the fire burning inside Murong Yu grew stronger. He massaged Han Xin's chest along with the sleek currents and kneaded his butt with the other.

"Why don't we just do it right here?" he asked seductively in his ears. Han Xin had been soaking in the water while being caressed by him so he was limp and burning all over. His only support was Murong Yu.

He suppressed his pants and looked up, dragging his fingertip along Murong Yu's jaw line. "Whatever you want. You're not gonna rest until you get your way anyhow."

Murong Yu had originally thought that Han Xin wouldn't agree to it. Now, without a worry, he planted a kiss on his neck before catching onto his earlobe and suckling it. Then he moved down to his chest and suddenly latched onto a nipple. Han Xin gasped as a violent shudder ran through him. His temperature rose a few degrees higher and he wrapped his arms around Murong Yu's neck. Seeing this, his reddening cheeks and the delightful moans coming out from his mouth, Murong Yu felt even more swept along and then began to work harder with his hands.

Han Xin felt the hands moving back and forth on his back, sparking fires as they travel down his spine and to his hips. He clung onto the man's shoulders as rushed moans escaped his lips.

Impatiently, Murong Yu licked his own lips. His lover had taut muscles, smooth skin, a cute and firm behind, and not to mention, the secret entrance. He gently massaged that place with the help of the warm water and carefully poked a finger in.

Han Xin tensed up immediately but gradually relaxed again under Murong Yu's kisses. He frowned a little at the feeling of something going into him but the hot steam from the pool helped a bit. He looked at the man in front of him, his red lips and clear skin... He couldn't help but smile—only Murong Yu could do this.

Han Xin's faint pants only aroused Murong Yu more. He ventured in further and the snug walls enveloped his fingers. The slippery touch made him wonder how ecstatic it would be for his member to be in there.

Han Xin couldn't wait much longer. He started squirming in Murong Yu's arms while digging his nails in his back, repeating faintly, "Quick... Yu, quick."

Murong Yu licked his jaw, successfully getting a response from Han Xin. "You want it?"

"Yeah..."

The seductive voice and the twisting and turning body utterly bewitched Murong Yu. He forced his roaring urges to enter the man, but instead planted tender kisses on Han Xin's flushed body while slowly wriggling his fingers. He had to be careful not to hurt his beloved.

He continued to play with the hole, making it contract which in turn excited him even more. He worked faster and found the little nub inside. He had only pressed on it when Han Xin began to groan.

"Ahh...mmnnn."

Han Xin felt he was being surrounded and baked by fire. Numb was no longer sufficient to describe what he was feeling. He had no strength left, only the wave after wave of desire.

"Yu, c'mon...hurry."

Murong Yu's member was already harder than steel and after he heard this invitation, he spread his legs apart and wrapped them around his own waist. After rubbing the entrance a few times, he thrust in.

"Ah!"

The two let out a cry at the same time, Murong Yu out of pleasure and Han Xin out of pain. Seeing his frown, Murong Yu started comforting his member and the sensitive parts along the inner thighs, caressing and kneading in hopes to alleviate Han Xin's pain.

Han Xin gasped for air while straddling on Murong Yu and following his every move. Murong Yu kissed his lips gently and asked, “Does it still hurt?”

Han Xin shook his head and kissed him back. “No. Go faster.”

Licking his lips that were dried from lust, Murong Yu nodded. He held Han Xin by the waist and started ramming into him. The moans that came out from his mouth became louder and louder. Han Xin felt that he couldn’t move his waist anymore; it was just trembling on its own. He was drowning in ecstasy and the only things in his world were Murong Yu’s eyes, tender lips and burning passion.

His member was being taken care of while even more pleasure came from his behind. His lover was going in and out of him, at first slowly before gaining speed and turning into a violent ramming motion. Pushing in, pulling out and then pushing back in again, Murong Yu continued his assault over and over again. Han Xin could not do anything else other than cling onto and move along with him.

Han Xin’s expression was one of indulgence and he was tingly all over. Murong Yu was savoring the rushed and blissful whimpers of his lover and the cozy feeling of his member being engulfed by his tight insides.

“Ahhh. Uh...hmmmm.”

Splashes, and also the sound of skin slapping, filled the bath chamber as the two naked, scorching bodies grinded against each other. The two had their foreheads together; they moaned as they looked into each other’s eyes without saying a word. They just embraced each other and felt the heat coming from the other person.

Then Han Xin yelped a few times. All he could feel were the powerful thrusts coming from behind. A thick, white fluid burst out and landed on Murong Yu’s chest and his own stomach. His muscles started to convulse and strangled Murong Yu’s member. He grunted and his own juices sprayed out into Han Xin.

Han Xin rested his head on Murong Yu’s shoulder while Murong Yu rested against the side of the pool. He stroked Han Xin’s back lightly as they panted and looked into each other’s eyes.

Steam floated in the air, obscuring the idyllic scene.

“You feel good, Xin?”

“Yeah, you?”

“It felt wonderful inside you.”

The two of them went back to the bed. Murong Yu pulled the brocade blankets over and enclosed Han Xin in his embrace. The man closed his eyes a little as if about to drift to sleep.

Murong Yu had wanted to ask Han Xin about those three words every time they finished making love but seeing his drowsy state, he would stuff the question back.

He thought, it doesn’t matter whether he says it or not as long as he stays by my side for life, does it?

Suddenly, Han Xin opened his eyes, his cheeks still flushed. He hugged Murong Yu around the neck and went close to his ear. He smiled lazily and whispered, “I love you.”

Murong Yu was a little sleepy but the next moment his eyes went wide. Surprised, he stared at Han Xin, not able to form anything with his mouth.

Delightedly, Han Xin snuggled into his arms. “I knew you wanted to hear it. Now can you go to sleep?”

But how could he sleep? He immediately pushed Han Xin down beneath him.

“Say it again.”

“Quit it. I don’t like repeating myself.”

“Say it again!”

“No.”

“No?”

“Nope.”

“Not gonna say it? Well, we’ve got lots of time, Xin.”

“You—hmmnn!”

The rest of his utterance dissipated with the clashing of their lips.


The canopy swayed gently along with the shadows casted by the red candlelight.

Outside the room was the brutality of winter; inside the room was the affection of spring.

¹⁵⁰ Used in the internet novel circle as a name for those who make the story super sad; another name for evil women. Think the cruel and mean stepmom from Cinderella.

¹⁵¹ Specifically the twenty sixth day after the Winter Solstice.

XXXI: Choices

he atmosphere of war suddenly intensified over night.

Xu Zheng is a quiet man with a determined air. Clad in black armour and holding his personal sword, he bows to Heng Ziyu and me before turning to leave. I watch as his tall figure disappears into the masses.

Using the gloomy evening as cover, twenty thousand elite soldiers leave discreetly. They are going to set up ambush for the Yan along the path to the capital in hopes to stall the southern descent of the steel hooves of Yan, and in turn buy more time for defense preparations of the capital. A winding line of shaky torchlight snakes out the city like a red serpent disappearing into the dark night.

The soldiers left to defend the city all hold their spears up, lower their heads and bow. That is the martial ceremony of the highest respect in Great Rui—performed only for the warriors who are not returning.

I hear a low sigh from beside me.

Night comes but sleep does not come to me.

I can hear the distant sound of the water clock. I haven't had any shuteye yet and am still gazing at the gloomy hall. After some time, I feel a sudden rush of frustration so I put on a robe and leave the bed. Immediately, Liu An rushes over.

"I am going to the walls," I tell him calmly.

Liu An speaks quietly, "It will be daybreak soon, Your Majesty. Why don't—."

I leave before he could finish.

The moon is in the middle of the tranquil night sky.

The city gates have long been closed and only the night guards are patrolling along the walls. The campfires crackle and embers burst forth, seeming extra clear in the silence.

I sigh and lie on a crenel, gazing at the pitch black sky.

The capital is still the capital but in my eyes, it has lost its beauty and luxury. And the days of glamour, wine and girls have gone too far to reach.

The prosperity and liveliness of Lake Yu and the bustling clamor in the markets is still the same but I wonder how much of those things will remain when that day comes.

And if I will make it out alive.

I taste a bitter tang in my mouth and close my eyes. I'm not sure where to start organizing my disarrayed feelings.

"Your Majesty?"

Startled, I whisk around to find Heng Ziyu standing behind me in inky black armour as dark as night. It appears he hasn't gotten any rest yet—his sword is still by his side. He's looking straight at me, not paying attention to any etiquette¹⁵².

"You have not rested yet?" I ask casually.

He replies with a serious expression, "Aren't You here too, Your Majesty?"

"I could not find sleep so I thought I would take a stroll," I say smiling. "I know You have had a long day. Better get some rest."

I've taken a few steps when I spot out of the corner of my eye that he is trailing behind me and soon he catches up to me. I look up a little at the sparkling stars in the black backdrop. "It sure is quiet."

He looks up too before looking back into the distance ahead. "It won't be anymore very soon. I wonder how things will be when the two sides clash."

I chuckle helplessly, "What else? Bloodshed, death, suffering, skeletons everywhere."

"Your Majesty." He turns to me with a doubtful gaze. "Are You afraid?"

I let my smile fade and shake my head. "If I was afraid I would probably be in Yening south of the Qihe River by now."

Our footsteps are slow and light, making the quietest noises against the limestone

"It's just that, well, I feel bad for dragging You into this."

I chuckle a little while looking downward. He immediately frowns and argues, "What are You saying? This is part of my duties as Your subject."

I turn away to the same-old night sky.

I have to say that our relationship seems to have gone past the initial weak alliance and there seems to be this thing called trust slowly blooming.

"I could understand why You had sent Duchess Yu Qing and the Eldest. The other officials and royalty, however..." His question trails off.

I look back at him. He's gazing at me, waiting for my explanation.

They all think I sent the duchess and the young son away for personal reasons but this man is cunning enough to see that I have an ulterior motive.

He's still watching me with a serious expression. I laugh, "Why not be straightforward about it if You have already guessed it."

His expression changes as he speaks through clenched teeth. "Could it be...a back-up plan?"

I drop the smile and turn my head, "Honestly speaking, I do not know what the future holds or whether I will live or die. If I die, then they can declare Duke Yu Qing's eldest emperor in the

South and continue fighting the Yan. The natural barricades of the Qihe River are easy to defend and hard to attack. The Yan are not adept at fighting in water and they have a fight of their own back home. With that Great Rui will be able to live on in the South.”

He opens his lips as if to speak but falters.

“I would have lost the people’s faith if I had relocated in the beginning and fighting back would be even harder to accomplish.” I spit, “Not to mention, I would be laughed at by the world, how the Rui are just spineless fools. Even if we won, our sons and daughters would have to live with the ridicule and shame! Even if I had to die I would want to die nobly!”

Something moves in his eyes; it looks like he’s touched.

“You are betting against high stakes, Your Majesty.”

“High stakes? Yes, I am. But,” I turn to look at him. “Did you not do the same thing back in the day? We are the same kind of people from that point.”

He stays quiet and looks away into the distance.

I do, too, and rest my hands on a crenel.

“Do You still have family, Marshal?”

“I have always been away from home and have not married. My parents have both passed away. There’s only my younger sister, Heng Zixiang,” he says with a gentle smile.

“Ziyu, Zixiang—very good names,” I say with a smile of my own. “Perhaps it is time to consider marriage at this age now, Marshal”

“My sister always says that she must be consulted before I get married. My parents doted on her a lot and made her quite bossy and often stubborn.”

I can’t help remembering Xiao Qinyun. I laugh, “I see. I had originally thought about marrying a princess off to You when the war ends for the immeasurable contribution You have made to the country.”

“Is that really true, Your Majesty?” He freezes and drops his smile.

“Taking a princess’ hand in marriage is fit for Your contributions.” I squint as a few morning rays peek over the horizons in the east. “However, all the princesses still in the palace now have a temper, too. I am afraid You would be the one to suffer.”

I can’t help but smile and shake my head. Between a royal-born princess and his beloved little sister—I don’t think even a champion warrior like him is able to escape the troubles of having to deal with familial affairs like these.

“Your Majesty,” he asks quietly after a silence. “I should not be asking this but, well, why have You not named an empress or consort yet?”

My stomach twists up and I say in a self-mocking tone. “Thank You for the concern, but no one knows what is going to happen. I cannot just leave them widowed for no reason. Plus, these things should be between two people in love.” I look down and pause. “And I don’t think I can ever...”

I murmur. “Not again in this life...”

The rays grow brighter and brighter, staining the east pale white. The dark plains turn into a rich green colour under its radiance, extending to the horizons as though boundless.

What a beautiful realm.

The two of us do not exchange any more words and only cast our gazes off over the vast stretch of flatland. The clouds churn like the ocean and the sunlight bursts through, shooting over the battlements towards the wispy clouds on the other end of the sky.



In the secret chamber, the Wraith leader is kneeling before me, handing me a thin piece of paper with his head lowered. Liu An takes it and passes it to me. Calmly, I open and read it.

I have to admit, the Wraiths are quite efficient. They arrived at the Yan capital in the shortest amount of time possible and quickly got in touch with all sorts of parties, including the previously existing ones. Not only have they gotten in contact with people working for the two princes, they even obtained information from the inner palace.

I remember when I was still in the Yan camp, Murong Yu mentioned that his father was ill, but according to their information, it seems the emperor's illness has worsened and he even fainted several times. Administration has gone to the left minister, the royal guards to the second prince, and the troops stationed in the capital to the third prince.

While the emperor is too sick to oversee the country and the prince royal is out at war, the maternal branches have started to act up. The left minister has tried his best to suppress them but to no avail. More and more people are getting involved in all areas and it has just become a mess.

The empress may be the emperor's wife but she doesn't have his affection. The emperor has always preferred the prince royal. He had been disappointed by the second and third prince's disregard towards his generosity. The empress' elder brother, the right minister, has always been trying to get the second prince the throne.

Amongst them all, the second prince has the highest hopes to ascend the throne. He was born to the emperor's wife and his uncle is the right minister. Through many years' efforts, he has controlled the royal guards and plots to usurp the throne.

The prince royal has no support from his mother, only the support of the left minister. The left minister belongs to Empress Dowager Xiao's clan. The emperor has agreed and promised to marry the left minister's daughter and the prince royal. The left minister has a strong footing and a lot of influence throughout the court. Once the prince royal takes his daughter as wife, it means he will be under the protection of the Xiao clan. No one would dare easily disregard the power of the Xiao clan.

I hold the paper above the candle and the flames leap up to devour the words. Bits of ashes flutter around.

As I gaze at the dark yellow flames, the past flashes before my eyes and makes my heart ache. After a long silence, I ask in a raspy voice. "Have you seen the princes themselves?"

The Wraith shakes his head. "In reply to Your Majesty, no, but we have met with their people."

"What is the situation?"

He hesitates for a moment. "According to the report, they were interested in our offer but did not express any wish to cooperate. The second prince even said he would only consider it if Your Majesty personally wrote to him."

I scoff silently to myself. I doubt it's just a written letter he wants. I'm afraid I have to stamp my imperial seal too.

"They even said that whether they will or not depends on Your sincerity." He presses lower to the floor after seeing my expression.

Sincerity, huh. It's none other than giving him what he wants. As a mortal, desires never stray far from fame, profit, power, authority, wealth and sex. A few more back-and-forths with him and I'll know exactly what he desires.

I wave my hand. "I understand. You may retire for now."

He leaves with his back bent and Liu An follows him out. I feel exhausted all of a sudden so I collapse on a comfy rug and let my mind wander.

If they say so, that means I have a chance to reach an alliance with them. If I invest everything into lighting the Yan army's backyard on fire, then they surely won't have the pleasure of entertaining the frontiers; if Great Yan falls into an unstable state, or even the emperor passes away, the left minister would not allow the prince royal to be away from the capital. He would definitely order a retreat. Even if it's not the entire army, the prince would need to return at the least.

I'm betting against high stakes and so are they.

It's just that I'm betting the future of Great Rui while they are betting their future welfare.

The only similarity is that we are all past the point of no return.

One careless move, one wrong step and what awaits us is a bottomless pit.

I sigh softly and close my eyes.

I don't have a second choice.

I spring up like a fish out of water. I lay out some letter paper, grind the ink, pinch the brush tip and start writing.

"From the Emperor of Great Rui, to His Highness, the Second Prince of Yan..."

I start chortling as I write. Thank goodness no one knows, or else those old farts would get caught up on the way of addressing. Those old farts love wasting time on these useless matters.

Names aren't important at all right now. Anything is fine as long as I can keep my country safe.

I don't know how long it has been when I have finished. I shake out my sore wrist and glance down. What I see gives me a fright. Damn. I wrote six full pages. I remember back when I would rack my brains out but still couldn't even get one page done when Master Liao used to make us write essays. I guess people just perform better under pressure.

With my head propped on my hand, I carefully read over the letter and after much consideration, take out the jade seal and stamp it. The stinging vermillion design sinks into the paper with a thud.

*Having received the Mandate of Heaven, He shall live eternally and abundantly.*¹⁵³

Dynasty of Great Rui

Seeing these words, I laugh out bitterly.

If the past emperors heard about their seal being used on this flimsy piece of paper, they would probably be so angry that they cough up blood.

After slipping the letter into an envelope, I write in lively handwriting 'Dear His Highness, the Second Prince of Yan.' I summon the Wraith and hand it to him.

"Deliver this to Yan hastily. It must be given directly to the second prince and tell them I will agree to any condition as long as they cooperate."

The leader nods in obedience. I get Liu An to take a sizable amount of treasures and money out of the private reserves for the Wraith to bring along.

I have to admit that this method is despicable but I've no choice.

I walk over to the windows whose blinds have been lowered by the maids. Between the bamboo strips, I see that outside the hall the night sky is filled with rain and still pitch black. The sound of the wind sounds chilling to the bones.

Suddenly, I feel the cold coiling around me. I hug myself and back up against the cold wall.

It's been raining constantly since autumn began. The South has always been plagued by floods and even though there has been no news about it yet, I doubt it's anything to rejoice over. The war in the North is already taking all the resources so if the South floods then we really...

My head starts pulsing with pain and there seems to be sharp ringing in my ears.

With an entire empire resting upon the shoulders of one person, he is bound to tire even if he were made of steel. Yet I do not have the luxury to be tired.

While I sit on the throne above all else, those kneeling officials are obviously sneaking glances at me. They are watching from deep within the palace; they are watching from the treacherous court; they are watching from the warring chaos.

I shut my eyes and curl into myself.

I had hesitated and wondered if it's worth giving my all for a country that fills me with sorrow. However, I have no other choice now. Father has told me with his actions that this kind of sacrifice must be made to prevent the loss and destruction of this land and establishment.

This makes me laugh out of pity.

But why must my love be the price?

The rainwater trickles down from the roof in uninterrupted streams. Beyond the blinds, rain falls in solid sheets and black clouds line the horizon.



The capital is under heavy security by now. Entrance or exit is not permitted. Fully armed soldiers stand guard and patrol every street corner. The rich and poor alike all stash their food for emergencies. The government distributes food to those who haven't gotten the chance to evacuate and helps them settle down.

Those officials who always looked so relaxed finally know the meaning of working like a bee. They all know the more time they save and the more that gets done, the probability of winning increases and the chance of surviving increases.

After the morning court and after reading through the memorials, I decided to go for a stroll on the wall. I reach the place where Heng Ziyu discusses the war with his generals. There are a surprising amount of soldiers and officials coming and going.

I draw near and signal for the guards to remain silent. I see many captains and generals around the military map, surrounding one person—Heng Ziyu. He has changed to dark, casual attire that accentuates his unique air which, along with his determined and confident speech, makes him seem more like the champion that he is.

I stay there quietly for some time. They don't notice me and only focus on the defense plans. I feel relieved and leave.

Only after a few steps, I hear his voice. "Your Majesty."

I turn in time to see him striding over, looking stern as always. "Your Majesty is here early today."

"There is nothing more important," I reply with a smile.

He nods and I walk into the room. The soldiers perform the rituals before leaving discreetly. I pace to the map and he trails behind me.

"How is Your injury?"

I only think of the recent assassination when he asks this. Almost reflexively, I touch the injured arm and feel a faint ache. His burning gaze is filled with concern. I look back and say, "Many thanks for the concern. It is fine now."

He says after a short pause, "I did not have time to remove my sword that day when I heard the commotion inside. Bringing weapons into the palace is supposed to be punishable by death. I—"

I interrupt him with a dismissing wave. "You are overreacting. If it were not for You, I would be with Emperor Shun by now. So in that sense, You are actually **my** saviour."

He falters for a moment before recovering. "Please do not say so, Your Majesty. However, what You did afterwards was very impressive."

"It is just that every emperor must bring his own people to the court," I sigh.

Heng Ziyu takes several steps closer. "You're completely different from the person I knew before becoming emperor."

I take a few steps away while keeping the same face. “How could one possibly know the future?”

He nods, smiling. “That is absolutely right. I entered the army not knowing the riches in my future. You probably had no idea when You were just a Golden Guardian that You would be the supreme ruler that You are now.”

I crack a small smile.

Heng Ziyu still talks with the arrogance and pride of a powerful official and lacks a bit of respect but he is still easier to converse with than the others. All those old farts have been scared witless by my purge and don’t dare make a sound. They are always shaking like a leaf as if I’m going to kill them.

How pathetic is it that I’ve come to this.

“But Your Majesty seems to still be troubled. I often see You quietly brooding.”

I look back at him. “Marshal, do You really think **I** can be happy being the emperor?”

The autumn wind has turned cold and harsh, sneaking into my clothing.

Looking up at the sky, I sigh. “In the others’ eyes, being the emperor and being able to rule and control everything is the most awesome but none of them know the unease and worry that the throne has brought upon **me** since day one.”

“**I** took the mission when disaster was imminent,” I scoff. “Securing the country is **my** duty; **I** am the emperor after all. But if **I** fail then **I** automatically become a sinner and will be shamed upon eternally.”

Heng Ziyu’s expression seems to change a little but he doesn’t speak.

I shrug. “It is not a fair deal at all.”

“Then,” he asks quietly after some hesitation, “Why did You choose this path?”

I raise my two index fingers. “If there were two paths to choose from,” I wave them and say, “One is death and the other is becoming the emperor, which would You choose?”

He holds my gaze and answers steadily, “Staying alive is the most important, of course.”

I nod and lower my hands. “Then there is Your answer.” I sit down and pour myself a cup of tea.

“Having grown up in the streets, **I** do not know too much about aspirations and righteous principles,” I say while running my fingers along the edge of the cup. “**I** did not study well from my master. What **I** am doing now is solely based on **my** own judgement.”

He raises an eyebrow. “How strange for Your Majesty to say that. You might have an extraordinary background but how could it be that You grew up in the streets?”

I don’t want to talk about the horrible days so I just laugh it off. “The world is full of strange things.”

He sits down beside me and rubs on his sword handle while watching me. I face another direction and drink my tea.

We’re temporarily silent.

I don't like his gaze. It is too mysterious and seems to be able to observe my everything right through my own eyes.

His sharply slanted brows show inquiry and worry. His gaze shows no fear or reverence, only undisguised inquiry which exceeds that a subject has for his ruler and holds within it certain other meanings.

Forcing my unease away, I stay unmoved.

Perhaps at a different time and different place, we could become a model of the perfect ruler and subject. However, there aren't that many 'perhaps' in this world. He wouldn't be satisfied with just a high position, wealth and power. He wants to rule the world and have his name heard by everyone.

This position isn't what I had wanted to begin with.

"Your Majesty," he breaks the silence finally. "If I may ask, do You really plan to die defending the capital?"

I reply steadily, "I thought we have already discussed this before."

The sword wobbles a bit but his expression remains unchanged. "You are the crux of this nation. If You really... I am afraid that things would take a turn for the worst."

I look back at him. "Through all those battles, have You ever backed away from a perilous situation in fear?"

He frowns and replies slowly, "But that is my duty as a soldier. Your Majesty is the ruler of this country; there is no comparison."

"Do not forget that I was once a soldier, too."

He doesn't respond but only plays with the sword handle with his eyes down.

Just as I stand up, I hear a racket coming from the city walls. The soldiers' cries sound panicked and rushed. I'm startled while Heng Ziyu springs up with his sword in hand and heads out the door.

"Allow me to look into it, Your Majesty."

Not even bothering to reply, I hurry after him. The two of us raise our heads to see what's going on while dashing forward.

I hear the drumming of horse hooves from outside the building. Someone comes riding in. "Urgent report! Urgent report!"

We share a look and I feel anxious. Heng Ziyu says in a low voice, "I fear it's from the frontlines."

As expected, the person looks exhausted. His armour is stained with blood and he is wounded in many spots. He dismounts with the help of others and kneels down, shakily holding up a military report that he gets out from his breast pocket.

I order for him to be taken for medical attention before unfolding the report. A pungent odour of blood fills the air at once. I frown at the brownish-red page.

Xu Zheng led twenty thousand dragoons to Luo Yuan and stationed the men along the road. Two days later, they clashed with the Yan cavalry to the north of Luo Yuan. The two sides fought a

bloody battle. Yuwen Yuan, using his advantage of more advanced troops, ordered for the left and right wing to attack from the two hills. The twenty thousand dragoons did not budge and battled with the Yan.

The awesome battle dyed the world red with blood.

The Yan pushed Xu Zheng and his men until their last breaths and killed them all. The plains of Luo Yuan became filled with corpses and hoarse cries.

Not able to keep reading, I close the report but the bloody odour seems to have coiled around me.

I feel something on my wrist—it's Heng Ziyu's hand.

"You must not show it, Your Majesty," he whispers as he holds on tightly.

I feel my throat constricting. Nothing comes out.

Xu Zheng, that quiet and determined man, shed his blood for the last time for this country. And what he and the twenty thousand men got in exchange for their lives is stalling the Yan's arrival for merely three days.

Three days.

"Your Majesty, this is our last chance that they have given up their lives for."

I turn my head back a little and meet with Heng Ziyu's gaze.

He's right. I don't have the luxury to mourn the dead. There are more important things waiting for me to do.

My head spins and my legs feel wobbly. The moment I step into Tai Qing Palace, I can no longer support myself. My legs buckle and I fall short of the doorstep¹⁵⁴.

"Your Majesty." Heng Ziyu holds onto my arm and hoists me up.

His gaze is so steadfast it makes me feel at ease.

"Rest for now, Your Majesty, and allow me to do the rest." He helps me sit down. He looks worried.

I just feel like my head is cracking open. "Thanks, Marshal."

Exhausted, I shut my eyes. Twenty thousand human beings have become one with the earth, never to exist again. I'm in a stupor as I laugh. I thought I already knew that this was going to happen.

The evening winds start blowing through the rows of palaces and the candle flames flicker. The sky is gloomy as though signaling the approach of a storm.



The following day, even more unsettling news reaches the capital.


Delegates sent by the marshal of the Yan army have come requesting that the city gates be lowered in surrender.

¹⁵² Subjects are not supposed to hold the gaze of the emperor.

¹⁵³ Referenced from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heirloom_Seal_of_the_Realm. The imperial seal consisted of eight characters with slight variations in differently dynasties. The one used in the story is the same as the one used by Qin the First.

¹⁵⁴ Traditional Chinese housing has a raised ledge at the door of a building to separate the outside and inside.

XXXII: Van Smoke

ilitary personnel are not to enter the city, thus the hundred or so cavalry that accompanied the delegate remain outside the walls. Still, this causes great distress for the entire capital.

The army plated in red armour stands in formation with their bows and spears ready. Piercing light reflects off of the forest of spears. With just one glance, you can feel the aura of the battlefield overpowering you.

The officials stand quietly in Tai Qing Palace. Dressed in the black auspicious regalia and Twelve Pearl Crown, I sit upon my throne.

“Summoning the delegates of Yan!” The attendant’s slightly shaky voice drags out, forming echoes in the hall.

The vermillion palace doors swing open and the officials turn to look. Two shadowy figures are approaching. The two soldiers dressed in black walk into the palace in big, proud strides.

There are two delegates. The main delegate is a tall, well-built man with a full, black beard. He has a high forehead and wide face, appearing very rough and fierce. He looks straight at me with his head held high while his assistant has his head lowered. Neither of them bows.

“Kneel!”

“Kneel down!”

The officials shout. Song Ruoming barks angrily, “How dare you remain standing in front of the emperor?!”

He sneers and rolls his eyes. “Delegates from the stronger country need not bow to the king of the weaker.”

The hall is immediately full of clamour. Many quick-witted auditors have jumped out and started listing all his offenses according to the books. They spew an endless stream of accusations. The delegate keeps snickering and doesn’t even bother with them.

I’m angered but also amused. Angered because of the delegate’s arrogance; they’ve come in the name of negotiating surrender but really they’ve come to threaten me. Amused because of the stupidity of these officials; why would they even try communicating to these coldblooded murderers?

"I am a citizen of Great Yan. I only kneel to the emperor of Great Yan!" he declares determinedly. He does not kneel down or lower his head.

This causes an outrage amongst the officials and they start arguing with him, calling him a barbarian¹⁵⁵. However, the delegate laughs it off. "So what if we are barbarians? Only the victorious become kings and those who lose become the shamed."

He glances towards me. "So you're the emperor?"

Despite being furious, I keep a mild smile. "That is right. 'Tis I."

He chuckles. "Just some weak, delicate twenty-year old chicklet." Then he shoots me a disdainful look. "You're nothing like the majestic eagles of Yan. Our emperors are all heroes and champions. No wonder the Rui army doesn't stand a chance against our brave soldiers!"

The officials' faces all convulse and they all turn to me, waiting for my retaliation.

I clench my fist to remain calm and smiling. "Our two countries are currently at war. For what have you come?"

He laughs satisfyingly. "Twenty thousand of your men died from our swords in the battle of Luo Yuan. The corpses were enough to make a mountain," he says as he scans the officials. "I think you're just fish out of water; you can still manage to flop around a few times."

I give him a thin smile and raise a hand to stop the officials' commotion. "Hand over whatever it is you have."

He lets out a displeased grunt as he takes out a letter. A blue-ranked attendant briskly walks down. He shakes a little when he fetches it from the unfriendly delegate.

I only open it a little when I spot the powerful and experienced strokes across the page. It's *his* writing.

The contents are simple: requesting for the emperor of Rui to surrender the city immediately. I can read the arrogance between the lines; his words are menacing. He proclaims he will cleanse the city with blood and spare no lives if I do not surrender within three days.

Not wanting to see it anymore, I fold it up and move my gaze to the hall in front of me.

I didn't spend much time with him but I can still recognise his penmanship. It was just a glance but I feel as though my heart is being ground up. I start seeing black spots and my temples start pulsing with unbearable pain.

Murong Yu, have we really come to this now?

I am not going to surrender. If I can, I would really like to know what it's going to be like meeting you again on the battlefield.

Either you're going to die, or I am.

I crumple the war declaration and shoot up from my seat. Alarmed, the officials all shut up and look around uneasily. I scoff and toss the letter down the steps. The delegate looks angry but doesn't risk losing his temper.

They all stand there waiting for me.

"I will not be a sinner. You thought wrong about us!"

Only after a split second's silence, the officials bow down. "Long live our emperor!"

The delegate's face contorts in fury and I spot veins bulging out on his face. He bends over to pick up the letter and shoots an angry glare at me. "Then we'll see you on the battlefield!"

I guffaw. "Go back and tell your prince: Lin's head is right here for him to take!"

Then I straighten my sleeves and call out, "Guards! Send the delegates of Yan out at once!"

The Golden Guardians standing outside the hall rush in and grab the two men by their arms, dragging them out of the building. The main delegate is still shouting, "Just you wait 'til we break through the city. You will pay for the shame you put on us today!"

I drop my smile and descend the palace steps. The officials crowd around me but back away as I step forward, clearing a path before me like Moses did the Red Sea.

Heng Ziyu is very close by; his voice is right in my ears, "Your Majesty?"

I've already made up my mind. I say casually, "I am going to send the delegates off. This way they cannot blame **me** for being disrespectful."

Dismissing the other officials, the two of us walk up to the top of the walls. The soldiers standing guard are dressed in shiny armour, looking fierce and strong.

I squint and spot the two delegates being dragged out forcefully. The steel gates shut behind them. The main delegate looks up with a murdering gaze after mounting his horse.

"Mark my words! All you people in there! When our army arrives, you shall perish!"

Extremely angered, I break out laughing instead. "Marshal Heng, You have trained the soldiers for all these days. Show us Your results today!"

It takes him only a moment to understand. He turns and shouts, "Archers!"

Before his voice dies down, two rows of bowmen nock their arrows and aim for the cavalry outside the city.

They immediately start panicking. "You wouldn't!"

I stick my head up and hold out my hand. "Hand **me** a bow!"

A heavy set of bow and arrow gets put in my hand. Slowly, I draw the bowstring back to its fullest extent and aim it at the delegate.

Seeing this, sounds of surprise come from both inside and outside the city. The delegate falters before guffawing while pointing at his own chest. "Hah! A kid from the country of cowards is trying to scare me? Shoot! If you can get it over here that is!"

I hear the furious shouts behind me getting louder and louder.

The dazzling rays of the noon sun hone in on the icy head of the arrow. The dark steel flashes white under the luminance and stings my eyes.

I do not need to kill him. I just need the appearance of. That is enough!

The emperor of Great Rui will use this shot as the answer!

I take a deep breath and release my grip. The arrow zips through the air.

"Release!"

The arrows transform into thin tracks of light and fly out with a sharp whistle. I hear numerous twangs of bowstrings from behind me and the arrows start raining down upon the cavalry.

It's chaos down there—dust flying in the air, horses whinnying in fright, knocking many soldiers onto the ground. I can even hear the sound of the arrows sinking into flesh. The main delegate is hit in the chest and struggles while taking his last breath.

I breathe in deeply while watching the scene below. I yell at the assistant, "Leave! Go back and tell them! *This* is Great Rui's answer!"

The soldiers behind me roar with joy, their morale skyrocketing. Ignoring the pained screams from below, I toss the bow aside, push the crowd apart and descend the wall

I feel a little pain coming from the fingers on my right hand. I glance at it and see that the bowstring has left very thin lacerations on my index and middle finger and my palm, and tiny beads of blood are seeping out.

I guess it's not surprising because I haven't used a bow and arrow for too long. I can't go to the court doctors though. Those old farts would just overreact. I'll just take care of this myself.

I raise my hand and stick my injured fingers into my mouth. A light rusty taste enters my senses at once.

So blood could be this bitter, huh.

A huge figure blocks my vision; all I can see is the train of a black battle robe. Not able to stop in time, I almost crash into the person.

"What's wrong, Your Majesty?"

"Nothing?"

Seeing the weird look on Heng Ziyu's face, I realise that I still have my fingers in my mouth. I quickly hide it in my sleeves and switch to my usual expression.

His eyes flash and he grabs my wrist.

"Are You hurt?"

"It is minor, nothing serious. Could You let go of **my** hand, Marshal?"

"Let me see." He lifts the wide sleeves up. Alarmed, I pull my hand back. He glares at me and doesn't let go. My wrist starts hurting from his grip.

Our eyes lock. No one says anything but I can sense that he is serious.

Our eyes dance apart after a while and his grip loosens a bit. I discreetly pull my hand away. "It is just a small cut."

He peers at me from the corner of his eye, unsmiling. "Even so, You must not take it lightly."

He takes my wrist again and pulls me along in a whiz. There are many guards and servants around but he pays no attention to them and just strides forth with me in tow.

When we get to the palace hall, all the maids and attendants have left. I jerk my hand away.

"Just what are You trying to do?" I ask while facing the other way.

He sits down in front of me with a frown. He takes my hand again without warning. "You think this is a small injury?"

I don't want to reply so I just let him apply medicine and dressing on me. He's very experienced but still too rough. I hiss from the pain from time to time.

They say the fingers are tied to the heart—they are absolutely right. Even a tiny injury like this hurts like my flesh is being scraped off. What's more is that he would tug the bandage to make it tighter in addition to wrapping it round and round my fingers.

I bite down so I don't make a sound. He pauses and looks at me.

"Does it hurt, Your Majesty?"

I frown and shake my head but he reaches up for my forehead. It's late autumn already but tiny beads of sweat have formed on my forehead.

"Your Majesty," he says hesitantly. "Are You trying to hold it in?"

"You are exaggerating things."

He leans in and opens his mouth as if to say something but nothing comes out. He goes back to work with my hand. "If so, please bear with the pain. It'll be over soon."

I see worry from his gaze as he puts my hand on his lap. He pulls on the bandage again and I can't help but hiss again.

He's just like *him*, never knowing how to be gentle.

He says warmly, "I thought You would yell at me, 'can't you be any gentler'..."

I fall into a trance-like state and completely stop listening to the rest of his sentence. I think I said those words before to a certain someone and I definitely yelled very ill-temperedly, 'Say, can't you be any gentler!'

"Done."

He looks up from his work and I take my hand back only to find that it's been wrapped up like a mummy.

My lips jerk. "Marshal, **I** think anyone with eyes will see that **I** am injured."

He stays quiet momentarily with a smile. "You may take it off after tonight. The scars will be barely noticeable and no one will be able to tell."

I cast my gaze downward.

I'm not sure why he's like this today but I guess he cares?

"How many days have You not slept?" he suddenly asks.

I massage my sore wrist and reply, "As many as You, Marshal."

"I know there are many matters to deal with but You must take care," he urges with a concerned look.

I look back up at him to see his heated gaze threatening to pierce right through me.

I turn my head to avoid it. "**I** could say the same to You."

Even though I'm facing away from him, I can still feel the inquiry from him. I grab a cup of cold tea and take a sip.

"We aren't supposed to shoot the messenger. I did not think You would kill him Yourself," he says quietly.

"They were disrespectful to begin with, humiliating **me** in **my** court, mocking **my** country. **I** have nothing to say to people like that."

"Are You not worried that doing so would anger the marshal of Yan?"

The tea in my cup shakes but my voice stays calm. “So what if **I** do? So what if **I** don’t? **I** have already made up **my** mind to fight back so there is no point in stopping halfway.”

I ball up my fist. The miniscule pain is becoming bigger and bigger until it punctures my heart.

I glance sideways at him. “Are You afraid?”

He beams at me and replaces the tea cup with his warm hand. “What do You think?”

I chuckle nonchalantly.

He draws even closer and his eyes narrow. We’re so close now that we can feel each other’s breath.

“I don’t think,” he says as he leans in, “that anyone else has ever seen You sucking on Your fingers, right?”

I stop and his thin lips curve up warmly like melting ice. He tightens his grip on my hand too and I feel the plushy warmth against my own.

“I also want to know what really lies beneath that dignified mask of Yours.” He lowers his voice even more and his hot breath hits my face.

I stiffen as anger bursts out from within—never has anyone been so impudent with me and said such forward words.

But I cannot be angry and I *cannot* be in his bad books. I need to rely on him, on his connections and on his army, at least for the time being. If our weak alliance were to break right now, the most horrible and terrifying thing would ensue.

I push back the fury and try my best to stay calm before meeting his gaze and letting him look straight into me. The alliance with him isn’t for my own desires but for the country and the land. He understands this point. The eggs can’t stay intact in an overturned nest—it is not good news for him either if the country falls.

I flash a small smile. “You are too humorous. Everyone has different sides. They all see the murderous, determined and relentless side of Yours but they have no idea that You would bandage someone else’s wounds and be a big brother who dotes on his little sister at home.”

He keeps his eyes on me in silence while I draw back my hand and change the subject. “What would You have chosen in that situation?”

He straightens his posture and returns to his usual, serious self. “Even the score; an eye for an eye.”

We burst out laughing at the same time.

This facade of a harmonious pair of ruler and subject has to go on and both of us are well aware of this.



There are still countless memorials and military reports for me to read. I don't even have time to whine about it.

The chill of late autumn soaks through my clothes and into my heart. I feel cold—cold, helpless and lonely.

Liu An leads a train of attendants carrying piles of memorials into the room. He pours some tea and lights the candles for me.

"Perhaps Your Majesty would like a short rest?" he asks with a respectful smile.

I put down the brush and warm my hands with the tea but I keep my eyes on the memorials. "Is everything all right in the inner palace?"

Liu An answers delightedly, "Everyone in the palace is talking about that shot of Yours. They say Your Majesty is the most skilled with the bow and arrow and the bravest warrior. The commoners are even making You out to be a legend. They say Your Majesty was just like the hero, Hou Yi¹⁵⁶, of the ancient times. You aimed the arrow into the air and killed the barbaric delegate. You got even for Great Rui."

I don't bother to retort.

That person is not me. That person is just the emperor of Great Rui. Stories during times of war are all like this. That arrow flew through the air and raised our hope and morale. For those people living in fear, a legendary emperor is their hope.

Counting the days, I realise the vanguards are going to be here soon.

"Any news...from over there?" I ask Liu An.

He falters for a moment before answering with his head lowered, "Unfortunately, not yet."

Even though I'm a bit antsy, the war doesn't wait, so I must stay in contact with the Yan capital.

After some thought, I say to him, "I recall that the armour of Emperor Shun is also stored in Chong Wen Palace."

He nods and then I instruct, "Bring it out and clean it. I might just get a chance to wear it one of these days."

He seems to hesitate for a split second before bowing down. I wave my hand and dismiss him.

The hall is so quiet it's creepy. The flames dance shakily and I blow them out with a sigh. The darkness swallows me. Then the bright moonlight shines in at a slant onto the polished tiles like a sheet of pale frost.

I'm starting to like the dark. Only in the darkness can I forget everything. However, in the darkness, longing starts to grow furiously like vines, winding around me and stopping me from speaking and moving.

I've known since I was little that I have a twisted personality. I don't like intimacy; I don't like the people around me. But one person managed to be engraved into my heart, never to be erased.

My heart feels filled to brim. Something is trembling inside, trying to break out.

I'm too scared to touch it, to hold it.

Once I do, it will well out onto the ground and *he* will be everywhere I look. Once I do, I will be racked with pain that pierces through my heart and grinds my bones.

I don't think I can ever fall in love again in this lifetime. The price of love is too much for me to carry.

Suddenly, I feel an utter sense of abandonment.

I guess I'm still going to be alone in the end; I'm destined to walk the rest of the road by myself. *He* and I might still be alive but we are no longer what we used to be.

My lips open in a smile but it's one of self-mockery.

"Your Majesty."

I open my eyes to see a shadowy figure kneeling before me.

Thank goodness I blew out the candles, or else it would be too humiliating.

"Any news?"

He nods and hands over a flimsy letter. I hold it in my slightly shaking hands as though it were a burning red piece of coal.

"The second prince said that he's very grateful for Your Majesty's sincerity and that he hopes for cooperation so each party can obtain what they want."

I nod a little. "What else?"

"He also said that You should not worry about the capital. You only have to hold until early next month."

I brood silently. Early next month, huh. It's still too difficult. I cannot put all my chips with him.

"You are dismissed. Keep a close eye on the happenings in the Yan capital."

That morning when we parted ways, we appeared in each other's eyes but soon disappeared from them.

Neither of us knew that that morning would become our beautiful, final moments.

I fell in love but I have to send my love to the grave with my own hands.

I place the letter down and reach up for my neck where a fire has been lit. Everything seems to have been burnt away by it, yet my mind is also so tangled up.

Do you... Do you regret it?

Humans can be so spineless. No matter how much and how well we disguise ourselves, there's always a chink in the armour that causes the protection to crumble to pieces.

"Go back and tell your prince: Lin's head is right here for him to take!"

If... If I really do die in *his* hands, I guess it would be a happy ending.

I tilt my head back and heave a deep sigh.



The next day, Liu An has already gotten the armour cleaned and sent to me.

Emperor Shun comes from a martial background and was titled General of Jing Guo in the previous dynasty. In the end, he murdered and took the throne from his maternal uncle and sentenced everyone on his mother's side to death. Everyone called him cruel and heartless but who would have thought his sons would follow the same path?

With the help of the attendants, I put on the black battle robe embroidered with golden dragons and the silver armour. I stand tall before the ink black sword sheath on the table.

I slowly unsheathe it and once again hold the coldblooded Ding Guang in my hand.

Emperor Shun once said when he laid down this sword that he wishes for Ding Guang to never be used again and for the world to be free of murder.

I hold the three *chi*-long sword straight out in front of me and piercing light reflects off of its blade out into the hall. The sword of Emperor Shun has been brought back to life.

I shut my eyes to hide from the chilling feeling.

Murder. Murder.

With the sword in hand, my feet feel as if they were made of lead. The palace doors slowly swing open. Everyone outside is quietly and respectfully kneeling on the ground.

Heng Ziyu is of course waiting by the door in full armour.

The feeble morning rays break through the clouds and shine onto the land.

I climb to the top of the battlement and cast my gaze far. The cool breeze brushes past, whooshing and gushing in my ears. The officials and over half of the troops are standing silently in formation in the square below.

The brilliant sunlight jumps out from behind the clouds as the wind stirs them.

Nine high-ranking army officers are standing at the bottom of the stairs, performing the rituals. "Saluting His Majesty!"

I raise my hand a little and everyone falls silent to listen.

"The Yan army are almost upon us. We must show them the vigour and power of the sons of Rui. And we shall never surrender even in death!"

I pull Ding Guang out and a sliver of blinding light flashes before me. I point the sword to the sky.

"Before us lie two paths: dying without a battle or fighting to the death. By fighting, we do not bring shame to our blood, to our ancestors or to ourselves. Most important of all, we will have a chance at life. But by not battling, there will only be death!"

These words come easy to me and seem to light a fire in my heart.

"No matter what happens, I shall always be next to you all. I shall not leave you to live on selfishly!"

I say in a clear, booming voice that echoes in the square.

"Your Majesty!"

"Your Majesty!"

The officials all bow down and kowtow while the thousands of soldiers raise their weapons high and let out a deafening roar that shakes the soul and rings in the ears.

The signal fires blaze fiercely and reach for the sky. The drum beats rock the earth, hitting the heart of every being.

I howl, "Death before surrender!"

"Death before surrender!"

"Death before surrender!"

"Death before surrender!"

The chant is repeated over and over again, lingering for a long time like thunder. The soldiers hold their weapons straight up above their heads and shout along.

The next thing I know, a storm of yellow sand has risen above the boundless plains.

I stand up tall as if I can shoulder everything.

Murder. Murder. War smoke. War smoke.

Right now, the responsibility I'm carrying upon my shoulders is the lives of everyone in the capital, close to one million people.

The earth starts to shake and they all turn to look. Along the azure horizon, a blood red war flag billows wildly in the wind. The lupine beast is roaring towards the sky as always. The land becomes scarlet as if blood was really pouring down from the heaven.

¹⁵⁵ It was common practice to call other less developed civilizations and peoples around China barbarians.

¹⁵⁶ Hou Yi is said to have shot down nine suns to save the earth from drought and that is why we have one sun now.

XXXIII: Besieged

I coolly cast my gaze at the crimson tide advancing from the distance.

I see a forest of spears and hear the thundering of hooves. The sun shines on the sharp spearheads and blades, shattering into icy fractions of light. A blurry, yellow cloud of sand grows from underneath the horses' hooves and the red armour seems to form a sea of blood, stranding the island that is the capital.

Everything behind me seems to be frozen in place. No one speaks. There are only the increasingly rushed breaths.

The Lupine Blood Mounted Squadron—this means I'll see an old friend. But I do wonder what expression would appear on that sniggering face of his when he sees my face.

It certainly is a small world.

The soldiers standing guard steadily watch the gradually advancing red sea but the hand and weapon of a young soldier next to me is shaking nonstop.

The Blood Mounts are infamous for their coldblooded murder and cruelty. After devouring twenty thousand men, this bloodthirsty wolf has aimed its mouthful of sharp fangs at the heart of Great Rui.

My heart is pounding but I don't show it. "Announce **my** decree: Do not be alarmed. Civil officials are to return to their posts and all the soldiers are to make preparations." I turn and shout to the crowd behind me. "General Pei!"

Pei Yuan hurries out and gets down on one knee. "Your orders, please, Your Majesty."

"Deploy the Golden Guardians and shut the palace gates; notify the superintendent of the inner palace to secure all buildings and prohibit all movement! Those who disobey shall face decapitation!"

Pei Yuan rushes off with the orders and the civil officials leave in an orderly fashion without much commotion. I approach the ledge and place my hands on the crenel before carefully studying the scene before me.

"Your Majesty, this place is too dangerous. I beseech You to step aside," someone suggests from behind me. I ignore it and summon the new Minister of Defense. "Get someone to command

the army and inform the people in the capital of **my** determination to live and die with the capital! The troops are not to take a single step back; those who run away shall be shown no mercy!”

He bows in obedience and I continue, “Have the weapons and equipment been prepared accordingly?”

He answers with a calm expression, “In reply to Your Majesty, all weapons have been prepared. I had made orders for all arrows and swords in reserve to be transported to each battlement for the soldiers to use when needed.”

I nod with a smile but drop it right away. I clutch my hands, trying to stop the sweat from coming out.

I then summon the Minister of Revenue. “Go post an announcement in the city telling the people not to be alarmed. You must also take the lead and get all officials to take care of the people’s living. Tell them that **I** and the officials swear to live and die with this city and not leave them behind.”

He lowers his head but Heng Ziyu interrupts, “I also request that you organize young, healthy men to transport rock and lumber, and all doctors to prepare medicines for any wounded soldiers.”

The minister leaves in a hurry with the orders. I and Heng Ziyu share a smile before looking back into the distance.

The beating of the metal horseshoes is getting louder and louder and the earth itself seems to be quaking. Sand is swept high into the air and the numerous flags flap wildly in the wind. Red cavalymen in uncountable numbers have reached the city.

The endless red wave has just stilled when it seems to be split apart by a blade. A perfectly straight path clears down the middle and two people come forth on horses. The one farther away is the assistant delegate from the other day while the one in front of him has a strong build, tall and proud. He’s wearing shiny iron mail that is glistening under the sun. He pulls on the reins and turns his head when the horse halts, pointing his gaze straight in my direction.

A violent shudder runs through me.

That person—that figure— isn’t that Murong Yu?

My mind goes blank and I step backwards without even realising it.

I think Heng Ziyu noticed my slip up because he holds me by the waist and warns quietly, “What’s wrong, Your Majesty? You mustn’t show fear.”

I pant roughly and shake all over. I don’t want *him* to know that I’m the emperor of Rui. Even if it’s just a temporary escape, I don’t want *him* to know the current circumstances. It’s better to not meet at all. I’d rather *he* think I’m dead.

Right before I completely embarrass myself, I finally recognize the man—Yuwen Yuan.

My body falls limp instantly and only by holding onto the crenel do I manage to stay standing.

It was only a moment but it felt like eternity.

I adjust my posture while Heng Ziyu scrutinizes my face with a hint of suspicion. He lets go appropriately. I close my eyes. All I can feel is my crazily beating heart and the whooshing wind in my ears.

When I open my eyes, the delegate is yelling, "Listen up, all of you on the walls! This is the general of the Lupine Blood Mounted Squadron of Great Yan!"

My throat feels constricted and I can't speak very loudly yet. Heng Ziyu steps forth and remarks, "So you are General Yuwen. It certainly is a pleasure!"

Yuwen Yuan spits coldly, "Enough chitchat. Get your emperor to come out!"

I've calmed down by now so I pull my helmet down so that it covers my eyes, and lean forward. "Oh, it is you again!" I shout to the delegate. "Why, did you come back because you missed our arrows?"

I hear soft, ridiculing laughter from behind and see the delegate's face convulsing with anger. Yuwen Yuan looks up towards me with a smile but his tone is freezing cold. "This is your emperor?"

I'm not sure if he recognizes me yet. When I think about it, if Yuwen Yuan knows it means Murong Yu will, too.

"Tis not too late to surrender the city," he proclaims clearly and emotionlessly.

"And what makes you think **I** would do that?" I raise my brows.

With the sunlight dancing off of his helmet, I can't see his expression clearly but I can feel the intention to kill, nonetheless.

"If you unlock your gates now, write down your will to surrender and kneel before us as subjects, we will spare your petty lives!"

I point my nose into the air. "And if **I** say no?"

He swings his spear and points it at me. "Then please pardon our ruthlessness, for it was you who denied our favour."

Dropping my smile, I hiss, "**I** have no need for such favours!"

"That voice..." Yuwen Yuan stays quiet for a bit before bursting out in laughter. "It's quite familiar. I would really like to take a closer look at you."

My heart seems to miss a beat and I glare at him.

"Yuwen Yuan! Do not think for a second that the present Great Rui is still a weak, little lamb waiting to be butchered!" I bark. "No matter how fierce the Blood Mounts may be, you still cannot fly over the city walls like birds!"

Before I finish my sentence, Yuwen Yuan has nocked an arrow and he shoots. The arrow zips in my direction with a twang. Almost instinctively, I turn my head and the speeding weapon scrapes past my cheek and plants into the wall behind me.

"Your Majesty!"

My cheek is burning with pain; there seems to be a thin, long cut. Heng Ziyu pulls me back and a row of bowmen steps forth with their arrows nocked and ready to shoot at my order. Two teams of shieldmen dash forth and raise their shields in defense.

Warm liquid drips out and I wipe it off with the back of my hand, ignoring the pain. I fling Heng Ziyu aside and push my way through the crowd.

"I overestimated your marksmanship!" I shout while continuing to glare at him. "We shall stay standing until the end, whether it be battle or death!"

"Release!"

I hear a mass of twangs from around me and the arrows fly through the air like rain but the cavalrymen aren't alarmed. They quickly pull on their reins and retreat in unison while several hundred shieldmen leap forth from behind. The arrow rain plunges into their shields, going *ratatat* against the steel.

Yuwen Yuan holds his head high. "You shouldn't underestimate us, either."

Suddenly, long notes of the horn sound. From where I am, I see a large fleet of carts behind the thousands of cavalry, riding along the gentle curvature of the ground. The tall machinery is being pulled forward by cows.

"Escalades," Heng Ziyu squeezes through his teeth.

I start feeling restless when he drags me by the wrist to climb to the highest battlement. We see the innumerable, red army dissipating to allow the machines to approach. More and more of our soldiers have climbed to the battlements, armed and ready for battle.

I take a deep breath and roar, "Fellow warriors! There is no turning back for us now. Behind us is our home and our families. We must fight for our home and fight for our families. None of us can take a single step back. Real men should die on the battlefield; there will only be dead warriors, not dead escapees!"

"Death before surrender!" they echo.

The horns' notes abruptly climb higher and waves of soldiers rush towards the wall. Drums start beating from the battlements and the bowmen fire their arrows restlessly. The arrows shower down onto the field before the gate. Using ladders to cross the moat, three warriors carry each escalate while one pushes it from behind. Yan footmen charge up the escalades with their sabers and swords while some stay at the bottom to cover the former with arrows.

Loads of arrows, logs and stone are being thrown from the walls while other soldiers are furiously engaged in close-quarter combat with those that have climbed up. The sounds of murder fill the air at once. The war drums thunder, bodies tumble down the walls, blood sprays out everywhere, and the painful shrieks become louder and louder.

"Reporting!" Some soldiers run up to me. "An Shun Gate and An Ding Gate in the north are under critical attack."

"Reporting! We have spotted Yan cavalry outside Yong Yang Gate in the west."

"Reporting! There..."

Worried, I scan in the directions of the other gates. Although orders and preparations have been made for absolute defense, I'm not certain it will hold.

The man beside me holds my hand tight and says quietly, "No need to be alarmed, Your Majesty. Have faith in me, please." Then he roars at the messenger soldiers, "Tell them to hold strong or die trying!"

I hear the horns blowing again; it's the capital's warning call. The soldiers shoot, hurl logs and stones at the enemies below and the Yan footmen tumble down from the escalades. There are many soldiers pouring boiling tar, too. The field below is wet with blood and flying body parts. Soon, the moat turns red.

Yet, Yuwen Yuan is patient beyond belief. He stays mounted on his horse and watches from afar.

Under the arrow shower, several dozen men carry a large battering ram while several shieldmen clear a path for them. They start hitting the gate repeatedly. The steel gate shakes and clangs under the assault while the soldiers inside the city use everything they can to block the gate and keep it from budging.

More footmen rush forth as soon as the bowmen slow their fire, and force their way up to the walls. The defending soldiers have gone into a killing frenzy, hacking down anything that comes up the wall and immediately filling the gap in the line of defense. When one row of soldiers falls, another row steadily takes their place to continue the massacre. The Yan also have bowmen shooting up and soldiers are hit from time to time but more take their place right away.

I don't know when this seesaw battle is going to end.

The battle lasts into the afternoon.

Clouds of black smoke shoot for the sky and enshroud the sun. The shouting, wailing, clanging of weapons and muffled thumps of blades digging into flesh keep echoing in my ears as the sun appears to dim.

There are battlements for cover but none for the soldiers out in the plains. Gradually, the Rui gain the upper hand from having higher elevation. The soldiers ramming the gates have all fallen under arrows and the footmen are killed before they even get to the escalade. The attack seems to slow down as well.

The first round of assault finally stops at twilight.

Yuwen Yuan raises his hand and the gongs ring¹⁵⁷. The Yan recede like the tide, leaving behind only the mounds of corpses in front of the city.

After brief cleaning and changing shifts, Heng Ziyu and I do a head count. The good news is that our casualties are fairly low.

Soon, the food service team climbs up to the battlements and delivers food and water for the soldiers. The dead and critically wounded are carried down while the ones with minor injuries are bandaged on the spot.

Along the way, all I see are broken weapons and limbs and blood everywhere.

"Would Your Majesty like to return to the palace for some rest?" Heng Ziyu looks at ease while I shake my head weakly.

I say after looking at the soldiers resting along the path, "I can at least boost their morale by being here."

Seeing their blood-dyed armour and exhausted sleeping faces, I can't say much else. The deep, ugly wounds and the rusty blood have brought me face to face with death and pain again.

Leaving Shang Wu Gates in the north side, he and I go over to An Shun Gate, An Ding Gate and Yong Yang Gate together. The soldiers there have also fought fiercely. The limestone has lost its colour from being soaked by blood and when I walk across it, I feel as if my feet are going to get stuck.

As Heng Ziyu and I descend the battlement side by side, the fatigue disappears from the soldiers' faces and they stand up tall, their bloody and dusty faces full of liveliness. The centurion orders them all to stand properly but finds a young soldier asleep, curled up in the shadows. He seems to be sleeping comfortably with his babyish face hidden in his heavy helmet.

The centurion is about to wake the soldier when I stop him.

He's just a boy and probably still needs a lot of sleep. The day has been bloody enough so I let him have a good night's rest.

Under the gaze of everyone, I descend the stairs. The eyes behind follow me and I can feel their silent hope and dependence. It's as if I have gone back to that night after the bloody battle when someone asked me, 'Deputy General Han, are we gonna make it outta here alive?'

I was responsible for three thousand lives then; I'm responsible for one million now.

I could say that I didn't know then, but how could I say that now?

Could I?

No.

Because I'm their hope.

Hope, huh.

I look up at the dying sun. This vicious battle has just begun but could someone tell me when it's going to end?

A strong gust of wind as sharp as a blade blows violently from the plains.

Heng Ziyu whispers from behind, "These soldiers aren't very old. The youngest is just over thirteen years old."

"They came with You, right?" I ask flatly.

He looks conflicted as he sighs, "Indeed, they have. Some places down south are so poor they cannot afford to feed their children, so they enlist them in the army so they can eat."

"The South has always had prosperous people and fertile lands. How could that be?"

"The land and climate are good, indeed, but it's plagued by floods every year. Most of the wealthy people have moved, leaving the commoners behind. But," he starts getting a bit angry, "'Tyranny is more fearsome than a tiger'¹⁵⁸". The people not only had to suffer the pains of flooding but also the embezzlement of corrupt officials."

Startled, I remark, "But I recall the floods being dealt with every year."

His face darkens. "If it has been dealt with, then it doesn't need to be done every year! I couldn't even begin describing how much funding has been embezzled all these years under the name of flood relief!"

I feel my sense of hope deflating inside. He continues as I secretly ball my fists up. "The military and politics are separate and are not to intermingle, so even if I wanted to do something, I

couldn't. I can only do my best to take in the sons of the commoners and alleviate the commoners' burdens." He chuckles but all I can see is bitterness.

I understand. Those born as a commoner experience much more challenges than me and can better empathise with the sufferings of the people.

I've heard of the corruption of the government officials in the South and hearing his words make me feel all the more depressed. Tyranny is more fearsome than a tiger; the government is more fearsome than the floods. Now that the North is under attack, it will be the end if the floods start in the South.

My head starts hurting again as if something is squeezing on it, making it hard to breathe.

Salvaging the country from the war is only the first step. There is still a long way to go from there.

Dusk has gradually fallen and the sky is gloomy.

The evening breeze is a bit humid. The pungent smells of pine oil burning spread throughout the city. Heng Ziyu insists that he escorts me back to the palace.

"Your Majesty must appear at ease exactly because we are at war in order soothe the people," he explains.

I understand what he means so I head back to the palace without retorting.

The residents that I see along the way all look high-strung as if disaster is going to strike, while on the other hand, the palace guards and servants are all working as usual. The attendants come and go in an orderly fashion, not appearing unsettled at all. I can't help but feel relieved. The senior attendant in charge of the inner palace used to work for the Han clan but later swore loyalty to me. At this time of peril, he has used his strict management skills to hold the palace together.

I'm still not sure how to feel about the Han clan.

Without their protection, I couldn't have survived until this day; without the Hans' strong basis, I couldn't have ascended the throne. However, no matter personally or as a member of the royal family, the clan is my biggest enemy.

Within me flow the blood of Lin and also the blood of Han.

I can't even begin to count the number of people who have outright requested or discreetly implied for me to get rid of the Han clan. Yet, despite my tainted hands, I haven't been able to. My heart hasn't hardened completely to be able to withstand all attacks.

In the end, I'm not a coldblooded, relentless emperor.

After getting my wound bandaged and stuffing down some food, I summon the ministers to my sleeping quarters. They don't look their usual graceful selves either and all seem exhausted.

"I have already sent scouts out to see where the enemies have set up camp and gather information."

I flip open the list of fatalities with my head propped on my hand. "What is the total casualty?"

"In reply to Your Majesty, the total comes to two thousand and four hundred, of which six hundred only suffered minor injuries and can still be deployed."

The black ink filling the white pages seems to come alive under the flickering candlelight. Every name stands for a human being who was still laughing to their hearts' content just yesterday but is now sleeping in eternal darkness.

"Have the walls been cleaned? And are there any damages?"

"There are thirty-two places of damage and I have sent workers to repair them." The Minister of Works pauses before continuing, "Shang Wu Gate received critical damage and is being repaired with everything we have got."

I nod and push the list away. "How are the residents?"

"In reply to Your Majesty, there was a slight disturbance but the mayor had calmed the crowd. It's not a problem now."

"Tell him, he is solely responsible if there are any more problems with the people."

The Minister of Personnel shakes a bit before bowing down.

I wave my hand after leaving more instructions and they leave. Impatiently, I shut the reports and lean against the desk.

The humid wind blows into the building and sweeps the curtains along. I spot a faint silhouette coming to a stop before hiding behind the shadow of a pillar. I smile. What is the old geezer doing this time?

"Master, why are you playing hide-and-seek with **me**?"

Master Liao steps out after a long period of stillness. He's wearing a black robe and looks calm as usual.

"Your Majesty has not rested yet?"

I lean lazily to the side and let my eyes shut half-way. "I'm not sleeping tonight; the facade is only for other people to see." I watch him as he approaches and sits down on his knees next to me. "You haven't been around these days. Took a trip out to the country?"

He pulls a light smile while looking at me. "Just a trip out to the Blood Mounts' camp."

I know his martial arts is extraordinary so I joke, "Then this war should be easy. If you could go in and just behead Yuwen Yuan, this whole siege would be over!"

He shakes his head. "The Yan have set up camp thirty *li* from the city and the security is very tight. I am afraid it won't be that easy to take his head."

He adds after a pause, "The Lupine Blood Mounts originally totalled fifty thousand. The battle at Luo Yuan already brought them down to thirty-four thousand and they suffered many casualties today, too. The arts of war states, 'the worst is to attack a walled city'¹⁵⁹. Yuwen Yuan choosing to initiate warfare right away is none other than an attempt to boost morale. They saw how sturdy our defenses were and suffered such a heavy blow themselves. They are bound to feel worried."

I raise a brow. "So you mean...?"

"I would like to think that Yuwen Yuan will not initiate another offense until their remaining forces arrive. The Blood Mounts are his bragging right. He isn't so stupid as to harm it. Plus, if time allows, a long-term siege is undoubtedly the best option for them with regards to the one hundred thousand men on their way to the capital."

I tighten my fist. With an army of over one hundred thousand, if they just charged all at once, they wouldn't even need to lay siege for the twelve gates of the capital to crumble to pieces.

We look at each other. He's smiling so I ask, "Seeing your smile, I suppose you have plans."

"I cannot say for sure but I had a rough idea of what Your Majesty wanted to do when You asked me whether the Eidolons could infiltrate the Yan capital." He lowers his voice, "Attack where it is not expected and expose their back and stomach at the same time."

I drop my gaze, not sure whether to feel happy or sad.

"If Your Majesty would grant permission, I would like to take charge of the Wraiths. I have done similar things when serving under the duke."

I stare at him and ask slowly, "A trip to Yan is extremely dangerous. Are you willing to do so, Master?"

He smiles calmly. "Your Majesty, I went through a lot to search for the duke's son when His Lordship failed. I nearly died in the hands of the oppression army. My life is no longer mine so please entrust the task to me."

After much debate, I fish out the half-moon shaped pass that Uncle gave me and hand it to him. Master Liao pushes it back to me. "I only need one letter written by You and stamped with the Holy Seal. This pass has other uses."

My hand shakes a little. "You mean...?"

"Yuwen Yuan is not the marshal. He cannot make every decision. There is only one who can really control the army of one hundred thousand and that person is Prince Lie, the Prince Royal of Yan."

I shudder and stop smiling. Master Liao does so too and says sternly, "There is no ultimate alliance for us. We can cooperate with anyone. Our enemy in this moment could become our friend in the next."

"Yes, you are right, Master."

I write a letter to the Wraiths in Yan at once and stamp it with vermillion. I hand it to Master Liao and he folds it into his breast pocket, lowering his head. When he looks back up, he falls to his knees and knocks his head on the ground hard.

"I have served His Lordship for many years and have lost regard for my own life. To be able to serve the Eldest today, my life was worth it. Even if it meant giving up my life, I will gladly exchange it for the Eldest's safety."

'The Eldest¹⁶⁰.' So many people used to call me that when I was young.

"I have two things to say to Your Majesty."

"Speak."

"One, I would like to remind Your Majesty that Heng Ziyu can be a temporary partner but cannot be trusted deeply. Two, there are thirty Eidolons in Tai Qing Palace. If there is an emergency, they will use their lives to escort You out of the capital."

Servants have been replaced all over the palace since that day when I cleansed the inner palace. Naturally, Master Liao could let the Eidolons in under my permission.

Master Liao—he is so loyal but he couldn't possibly know that I would choose to die with this city if it came down to it.

"You must remember, three claps is the signal."

I nod. "Understood."

Am I going to see him again when he leaves this time?

Even if I have a million things I want to say, I can only say this.

"Take care on the road, Master."



I go back to the inner hall and take a short nap. In my dream, there are sudden flashes of blades and war smoke. I can faintly catch the silhouette of my parents but the next thing I know, the darkness enshrouds them and I can no longer see.

After struggling in the dark for a long time, I finally blink open my eyes. Covered in cold sweat, I push myself up. The darkness outside is impenetrable. It's almost the fourth watch¹⁶¹. The fourth watch is the closest to dawn but it's also the coldest and darkest time of the night. I don't want to get up so I wrap myself up in the silk blanket and lie back on the large bed.

I still can't recall what my parents really looked like and I don't have their portraits. The only way I can see my parents is through nightmares. How ironic is that?

It keeps getting colder, making it hard to fall asleep again. I get up and slip on the first thing I see. After a second's deliberation, I take down the *xiao* that is hanging on the wall.

The night sky is filled with a billion twinkling stars far and wide. The wind brings chills starting from the feet and creeps up the legs. I'm starting to regret only wearing one layer and a cape, but I don't want to go back so I just keep walking.

Only the whistling wind sounds in the quiet plains. The pale grey city walls are glowing red from the fires. The night watch soldiers huddle close to keep warm. Some are napping away in the corners. The centurion starts tapping their helmets to wake them up.

A centurion wearing black leather armour dashes out from behind me. I wave a hand and dismiss him. "Not a sound."

He falters for a moment before leaving quietly.

I pick a quiet place along the wall to sit. The wind blows in my ears. I run my hand along the *xiao*, sliding across the cool instrument and the scores of scratches along its body before placing it against my lips.

In the limpid night, under the pure glow of the moon, a soothing note rises from the *xiao*, welling up from the depths like the tides and swashing along quietly before abruptly shooting high over the city walls. Even the howling wind seems to be frozen in place by the web fabricated by the *xiao*'s melody.

The loose ends of my clothing get swept up into the air, attempting to run away.
 The notes stop bluntly as another low voice speaks, "Your Majesty."
 I lower the *xiao* and reply without looking back, "What a coincidence, Marshal."
 "What were You playing?"
 I cast my gaze off to the dark plains. "*Heaven Within the Moon*¹⁶²."
 Heng Ziyu draws close next to me. "I didn't know Your Majesty was skilled in the winds."
 "Why have You come instead of resting?" I crack a thin smile.
 "It's an old habit of mine to patrol the premises while armed no matter the size of the battle.
 Once in the first half of the night and a second time in the latter half."
 "Many thanks, Marshal," I say while facing straight ahead.
 It falls silent until the wind starts whooshing again and it seems to get colder again.
 "The song sounded cold and distant and maybe a little bit sorrowful to me. Are You not afraid
 that it will disturb the soldiers?"
 "Those being trapped playing the *xiao* to show ease and confidence, is this not what they want
 to see?"
 I lean against the crenel and let my clothes flutter in the wind like a white bird dancing through
 the heavy gloom of the night. I have not felt this relaxed for a long time.
 "*Heaven Within the Moon*—sounds like a song of love and longing." His tone turns playful.
 "Your Majesty, are You longing for Your lover?"
 I laugh nonchalantly. Only he would say such suggestive words.
Lover. Lover.
 The same scene occurred a long, long time ago. I was playing the *xiao* when *he* found me.
He, too, asked me what song I was playing.
 The song I played then, *The Cries of Soaring Swan Geese*, was a song of love and longing.
Lover.
 This word that has never been enounced will only be uttered as another word.
Enemy.
 The next thing I know, he reaches out and picks the *xiao* out of my hands. Startled, I turn to
 see him looking up from the instrument to clash with my gaze. I can't tell if he is cheerful or angry.
 "There are so many sword marks. This must be one feisty woman."
 I don't want to lose my temper so I stay quiet. He clips his lips while looking at me. "Could it
 be that Your Majesty has been glum because of the owner of this *xiao*?"
 "'Tis the gift of a friend of the past." I glimpse him from the corner of my eye. "Also, the
 current owner of this *xiao* is I."
 Heng Ziyu plays with the *xiao* with much interest. "This is a good *xiao*. Probably of excellent
 make." He looks up, his gaze becoming more heedless and his smile more enigmatic. "The woman
 must be a one-in-a-million beauty, too, to constantly be on Your Majesty's mind."
 I falter. One-in-a-million beauty? I guess it's correct but sadly, that person isn't a woman.

“Marshal.” I open my palm in front of him. He smiles at me after a momentary pause and places the *xiao* back in my hand. He lets out a suppressed, cold laugh that reaches far into the chilly night.

“Your Majesty is already the master of this realm. Why are You always so doleful?”

I gaze at the empyrean and before I know it, my eyes are wet.

“You know, Marshal, no one would be happy being stuck between dream and reality.” I slap the *xiao* against my palm. “Once upon a time, I had a small dream but now I have abandoned it and it will never be within reach again.”

He drops his smile. “You’re the son of God. What could You not accomplish?”

I sigh quietly and close my eyes. “In **my** opinion, being that can never make anyone happy. Not one bit.”

Before he can speak again, the *xiao*’s notes rise again, slowly circulating in the dark of the night like a crying swan geese, soaring off to somewhere faraway.

¹⁵⁷ The ringing of gongs signalled ceasefire.

¹⁵⁸ This story comes from *Book of Rites* by Confucius. Confucius passed by a woman crying in front of a grave and inquired about her situation. She said, “My father-in-law died from the tiger; my husband died from the tiger; and now my son has, too.” Confucius asked, “Why don’t you leave this place?” She replied, “There’s no tyrannical government here.” Confucius then uses this to teach his pupils that tyranny is more fearsome than a tiger.

¹⁵⁹ Taken directly from a translation of *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. The entire saying is: the best warfare strategy is to attack the enemy’s plans, next is to attack alliances, next is to attack the army, and the worst is to attack a walled city.
<https://www.sonshi.com/original-the-art-of-war-translation-not-giles.html>

¹⁶⁰ This is the title given to the first born son of all lords. Shortened from ‘eldest son of Lord ____.’

¹⁶¹ 3am to 5am.

¹⁶² This is a direct translation following the grammar of Modern Chinese. However, I would also read it as “the sky of which the moon is in the middle,” according to the grammar of Classical Chinese. Given that this song was written in the Classical style by a modern-day lyricist, I would lean towards the second interpretation.

XXXIV: Ruthless

The showers have come.

Pit-pat-pit-pat.

Although I'm worried that the South might flood, rain is a rather good thing given the current circumstance.

Morning court has been cancelled and I've got nothing on my hands after I read through all the memorials. Holding a tea cup with two hands, I watch the downpour and listen to the muffled booms of thunder.

The scouts delivered a report at dawn saying the Yan vanguards have made camp and are awaiting the arrival of the rest of the army. The number of the main forces remains unknown. One hundred fifty thousand is the conservative estimate. In addition to the Lupine Blood Mounted Squadron, they total around two hundred thousand.

"Your Majesty, there is someone requesting a meeting." Liu An comes in and bows down. This brings me out of my deep thought.

"Who is it?"

He answers after hesitating, "The lady serving the empress dowager."

I keep quiet. What could she possibly need me for now? I still get Liu An to summon her though.

Wearing a plain outfit, Maid Xiu performs the rituals. "Your Majesty, Her Graciousness humbly requests that You come to Yong An Palace for She has something to tell You."

The empress dowager resides in Yong An Palace, and with her original maids and attendants all replaced, her movement restricted and her daily activities under watch, only Maid Xiu has stayed by her side. Rather than enjoying the happiness of having a family in her final years, she has to struggle through it alone.

"What is it?" I inquire nonchalantly.

Maid Xiu lowers her gaze. "I am not aware. Her Graciousness said it is only meant for Your Majesty's ears."

I study her calm eyes. It doesn't look like she's lying. I wonder how many more things the old woman is hiding from me.

I will always remember the mockery in her eyes when she was being helped back to her living quarters.

There is no more noise except the roaring thunder from afar.

We arrive at Yong An Palace in the heavy rain. Maid Xiu asks quietly, "It would be great if Your Majesty could wait here momentarily. Her Graciousness was not feeling well and is still napping."

I nod and stay in the side hall for a bit before heading into the sleeping quarters

In the large, gloomy hall, I see an ancient woman leaning on Maid Xiu as she teeters to her throne and falls on the brocade cushions. I'm standing only a few steps away from her but it appears she can't see me clearly anymore.

"His Majesty is here," Maid Xiu reminds softly in her ears.

The empress dowager squints. Her eyes are out of focus but her smile is still graceful. "Sit down, please, Your Majesty."

She dismisses the servants while I chuckle casually and take a seat. "For what did Your Graciousness want to see **me** so urgently?"

"Your Majesty." She stares at me for a while. "Did You get injured?"

I realise there is still a scar on my face which has healed quite a bit already. I run my hand over it. "It's fine. What did You want to tell **me**?"

I'm sure she knows the current situation.

"No one can compare to Your comportment." She smiles and the wrinkles around her eyes become more apparent. "Still calm and collected even when the Yan are at our front door."

I return her smile. "With the hearts of our army and people united towards one goal, **I** have naught to fear."

She continues to observe me, her face pale and frail. "So You didn't leave a way out for Yourself?"

I'm a bit taken back and not sure why she's saying this out of nowhere. She sits upright and looks at me seriously. "It is time to tell You."

"Do You know Yi Xin Temple, Your Majesty?"

Yi Xin Temple was built by Emperor Shun to commemorate his birth mother, Empress Dowager Zhao Yu¹⁶³, and is situated in the countryside, hidden deep in the mountains. It is the place of prayer for the daughters of the royal family and noblewomen from all over the country.

The glorious beginning of Great Rui overshadows a woman's life of pain. Empress Dowager Zhao Yu was born the eldest princess of the previous dynasty. However, after Emperor Shun killed his own uncle, usurped the throne and became the emperor, Empress Dowager Zhao Yu was plagued with shame while she was alive and after she died, she couldn't be buried with her family. Thus, she rests eternally beneath Yi Xin Temple.

The empress dowager tells a tale of the past.

“Emperor Shun was a legendary figure in his younger years, having overthrown the previous emperor, but he had to witness his sons battling for the throne in his miserable, final years. Also, he became superstitious, worrying that the blood on his hands would lead to more bloodshed for his sons.” She lets out a deep sigh and her eyes lose focus once more. “The fifth year of Qing Zhao¹⁶⁴, he renovated Chong Wen Palace and especially rebuilt Qing Feng¹⁶⁵ Chamber at the far end of the palace. Does Your Majesty know what for?”

Chong Wen Palace— isn’t that the place where they enshrine the portraits of all the emperors? I only remember that no one is allowed to go into Qing Feng Chamber. What’s the story behind it?

It couldn’t be—

“The beautiful roof and tiles, the numerous halls and chambers and all the glamour and luxury are the cover for a secret tunnel leading straight to Yi Xin Temple outside the city, so that his sons may use it to escape death in times of peril.”

I gasp and start shaking.

“This secret is only told to the emperors and empress dowagers. I am telling you¹⁶⁶ this today to fulfill my last duties.” She looks untroubled as though she were simply talking about some everyday, trivial matter.

“And why tell **me** this now?”

Her smile is like the dead, yellowish leaves in autumn, dry and flimsy. “I do not have many more days ahead of me but Your Majesty is in the springtime of life.”

We face each other. Without cosmetics, her face is even paler and creepier, especially the poignant and proud smile on it.

I laugh dryly and turn away, leaving her behind.

I take a look back at Yong An Palace. The flickering candlelights seem feeble and desolate amidst the downpour.

While descending the steps, I slip and Liu An rush over to steady me. “Would Your Majesty like to return and take a rest?”

I tilt my head back and let the fat drops of rain hit my face. They have a bitter and tangy taste with something else mixed in that I can’t identify.

Without further hesitation, I fling him away. “To Qing Feng Chamber.”

The gallery twists and turns throughout the majestic buildings. It’s like a scene from heaven. The yard is full of green bamboo. The long, slender trunks sway in the storm, singing a bleak chorus.

The doors swing open and the darkness surges forth. Liu An lights a candle. “This way, please, Your Majesty.”

The decor in Qing Feng Chamber is opulent and splendid. My long dress slides across the cold tiles with a swoosh. I slow my pace. It’s quiet, so continuously quiet, so much that I fear I’m hearing things; it’s dark, so overwhelmingly dark, so much that I can only see the tiny dot of candlelight.

Standing behind the red sandalwood screen, I take the candle from the bowing Liu An and watch as he lifts up the huge, graceful *shanshui* painting and pushes on the apparatus on the wall.

The wall slowly slides open with a deep grinding sound and reveals the tunnel inside. The weak candlelight seeps in and makes the tunnel seem all the more sinister.

A gust of icy air gushes out. It's the smell of freedom. I reach for it from afar, attempting to grab onto it.

Tai Qing Palace, Feng Yi Palace and Yong An Palace are the grandest, most beautiful cages in the world that have trapped so many lives within it.

The secret tunnel is not only a hope for survival for the almighty emperor, but also a yearning for freedom.

Freedom lies right before me.

I feel like my feet are rooted to the floor, too numb to budge. The chilliness creeps up bit by bit from my toes.

That woman has me right in her hands again.

She carelessly puts me in a dilemma once again when I've come to accept my fate.

She has told me this secret specifically because she knows I'm no longer the old me, and now she will snigger about it on her way to meet the Reaper.

I suddenly start laughing. At my own insanity.

To be free and escape this inhospitable palace, to change my name and leave civilization behind.

That is my wish. And it was probably the wish of every one of those pathetic, lonely emperors that they have brought with them to their graves.

I no longer belong to myself since the moment I put on the Crown.

The freedom that I'm willing to trade my life for lies right before my eyes, yet I will never reach it in this lifetime.

"Close it," I say with a smile.

Liu An stares at me. "Your Majesty?"

I turn around and close my eyes, feeling very exhausted. "No need to look further. Let us return." Then I shake out my sleeves and head out of the building.



Late into autumn in the month of October. Rain has been falling for nearly a fortnight.

The entire city is enveloped in continuous autumn showers. The depressing air is hard to deal with. The palace is becoming colder and more desolate than usual, too.

I summon Heng Ziyu and the ministers to discuss matters.

Since losing control of the lands beyond the capital, the scouts have had less room to manoeuvre. The farthest they can get is the camp of the Yan vanguards and they cannot go too close to it, either.

The situation is undetermined. All we know is that Yuwen Yuan has sent out small teams to the surrounding lands around the capital. At first, we thought they were looking for the water source but no one can be sure now.

The capital has been in lockdown for a long time and most of the refugees from the North haven't been able to enter. Instead, they get captured by the Yan. The scouts say that the Yan have imprisoned the refugees and are herding them like cattle in front of the capital. The defense isn't very tight but the wailing of the refugees day in and day out makes it hard for those in the city.

Heng Ziyu furrows his brows. "It seems they want to force us into opening the gates with the lives of our people."

"Absolutely no." I frown. "It will all be over once those refugees barge in."

The ministers all have a tense and grave expression.

One of them starts, "First of all, the food in the capital is sufficient, but the population is high. There are also the army rations and the refugees from before to consider. There are more than just a few refugees out there. These are all burdens."

"Even if we have no problem with food, you cannot guarantee that all of these people are refugees. If we just so much as let in a few Yan spies, our defenses will mean nothing no matter how sturdy our walls are."

"If we open the gates, Shang Qing Gate in the north would be the first. The Yan have their swiftest forces stationed here. Once we open it, getting the gates to close would become an issue."

They fall silent and look at me. I purse my lips. "We *cannot* open it."

One of them speaks tentatively again after a short pause. "Those people out there are all Rui citizens. If we don't do anything about it, they will be the first to suffer if we clashed swords with the Yan."

"Not to mention, they might starve even if we chose not to fight."

Obviously, I know that but...

"If we don't open it, they die; if we do, we die," Heng Ziyu states sharply.

My gaze falls on another military report.

Despite the continuous rainfall, the rest of the Yan army has almost all reached the city and set up camp all over. You could see the plains filled with soldiers if you stood on the walls, especially the Lupine Blood Mounts and their helmets that are the colour of old blood.

The scouts aren't able to go that far so I can only rely on the few Wraiths for information.

The Minister of Revenue finally explodes, "Then how are we any different from those Yan?!"

"Silence!" I bark. "There *will* be a difference if we open the gates. They will be alive while we'll be dead!"

"But Your Majesty!"

"Have you even considered the one million people inside the city?!"

The debate continues and the usually mild-mannered ministers are all flushed red with frustration. Even by late evening, no results have been reached.

After I get the attendants to send them out, only Heng Ziyu remains. I ask after a short silence. "Why don't You return and get some rest?"

"I would like to chat privately with You, Your Majesty," he replies quietly.

I moisten my throat with some tea. "Speak."

"Our soldiers have seen the refugees already. The Yan captured and brought them here but didn't do much more. A small group went to Xi Zhi¹⁶⁷ Gate last night and got into a conflict with the soldiers there. They cried all night only to stop in the early morning. When I checked, the moat was floating with bodies that were shot full with arrows."

"And our men did that?"

He gives me a deep nod. I put down my cup and stare at the candle flame. "I heard there was a hundred or so?"

He doesn't answer my question. "I already arrested the centurion who let them shoot."

I wave my hand weakly. "Punish according to the army policy and give him the stick. He is to go back to his post afterwards."

"So You really are not planning to open the gates?"

"Can we?"

Without the Yan to oversee them, large groups of refugees have been lurking around a few *li* away from the city. They are eager to enter the city so it's only natural that they confront our soldiers. And what do the soldiers do? Well, they're not stupid; they know what the consequences are.

"Our biggest problem with these refugees is whether to yield or hold. The more we stall the more passive we become."

"That I know. No matter where these refugees are from, they are **my** subjects and I am responsible for everything that has happened." I scoff and shove the mountainous pile of memorials. "These are from those auditors, talking about some fancy bullshit about compassion and benevolence!"

I grit my teeth. "They think one hundred lives is worth risking all the other lives in the city? Who's going to be held accountable for the one million lives? And for the future of Great Rui? I want to be benevolent, too, but how could I at a time like this? No one can afford to pay the price for an act like this!"

"Calm down, Your Majesty."

I close my eyes and rub my temples.

"There were some wavering soldiers who asked me privately for permission to allow the refugees in." He pauses. "The Yan have always been cruel and ruthless and now they have forced us into a dilemma like this. Many days have already passed. No one can replace Your Majesty nonetheless. It would be best to make a decision soon."

I scoff. Make a decision. It sounds easy but he's just forcing **me**¹⁶⁸ to be coldblooded.

If the city makes it out of this alive, I am going to leave behind an inerasable spot in my records.

The candle flame jumps unsteadily like my fluctuating emotions right now.

I wouldn't be surprised if this was Yuwen Yuan's idea but if this was *his*, then there is nothing I can do but feel miserable.

Miserable that human lives aren't worth anything in his eyes.

"Announce **my** decree to the men: the defense forces are to tighten the security and be on the look out for any Yan movement; if refugees are stirring up trouble, they are to ignore it all, and if..." I switch to a much harsher tone, "if the refugees purposely disobey, *shoot them down!*"

I hear my own voice, each syllable slowly but distinctly echoing behind me within the empty hall. I don't feel anything in my heart anymore; no pain, no cold.

Heng Ziyu's gaze is unusually bright despite being hidden in the shadows. "You've decided?"

I stop myself from sighing and speak calmly like backwater. "Hesitation only leads to more problems."

"Reporting!" A man runs up the steps to the hall. Liu An¹⁶⁹ kneels down and holds a wolf-tooth white feather arrow out with two hands. "A message from the Yan, Your Majesty."

The two of us are a bit startled. Heng Ziyu asks, "Who received it?"

"A second lieutenant, Marshal."

Heng Ziyu passes it to me and I unfold it. The two of us shake our heads as we read it.

At first, they talk about some damn principle of placing the people's welfare before anything else and then the topic changes to them being utterly shocked at our soldiers shooting at the refugees last night. Then, they act as if they don't want the war between the two countries to hurt civilians.

I'm boiling with fury when I finish reading.

I put the letter away. "See, Marshal? I am left with no choice."

His eyes seem bottomless and his voice is so downcast I can't begin to describe it. "Your Majesty." I look into his eyes and shake my head weakly. I feel his hand on mine.

"No matter what, Your Majesty, I will be by Your side."

My heart seems to squeeze together. "Thanks," I say softly.

I don't know if my name will be shamed for the generations to come after this order is made. I actually want to look in a mirror to see if my eyes are so rational that they have become uncaring even in the face of the deaths of the innocent.

Exhausted, I close my eyes. I'm the son of Emperor Shun after all to be able to make orders without hesitation to kill all those helpless refugees. Emperor Shun constructed the tunnel and provided a chance at life for his sons because he feared karma. Then, could someone please tell me if I will be forgiven if I were to take this petty chance?



The sun suddenly comes out after many consecutive cloudy days, its powerful golden rays piercing through the idly floating nimbus clouds, making varying shadows on the vast plain.

I'm resting on the *ta* with my eyes half-closed.

I met with the Wraith that Master sent back and had a private talk that lasted the whole night. I only went to bed at the fourth watch¹⁷⁰ and got woken up by Liu An who came with a stack of military reports at daybreak. I glared at him while yawning, to which he cautiously replied that rising at the fifth watch is tradition set by the ancestors and he does not dare break it, yada yada.

I yawn as I complain angrily in my head. Emperor Shun must have been such an energetic person, able to conquer lands on his mount and govern the land in his throne. But he should have thought of the fact that his descendants may not be as lively as him.

I do wonder what he would have chosen if he were in my situation.

Liu An rushes in, reporting quietly, "Your Majesty, Auditor Song requests a meeting."

My brush stops in midair. Song Ruoming, he is most likely here for the refugees. I can't even count the amount of memorials he has written to me but I haven't looked at any.

So what if I do, and so what if I don't. Those civil officials are just a pain in the ass.

I shake my head. Liu An's expression turns sour but he bows down and leaves quietly. The repetitive sounds of the water clock can be heard from afar and the sunlight starts to spread out across the floor.

I don't know what time it is when Liu An comes in again, this time on his knees. "Your Majesty, Auditor Song has been kneeling for a long time."

I look up towards the door. Although I can't see, I can imagine Song Ruoming's expression: lips pressed into a flat line with his gaze fixed to the ground, as if to dig holes in it.

I put down my brush and ask, "For how long?"

"It has been three hours," he answers. "And not only Auditor Song, but almost all the auditors are outside."

I'm not sure what to feel. Judging from his personality, he would probably kneel there the entire day if I don't see him. Just as I thought, one should not mess with auditors.

Now is not the time for inner conflicts.

With that in mind, I say calmly, "Summon him."

Song Ruoming is wearing his formal court uniform. He comes close before kneeling down. He doesn't say a word nor does he look up at me but I see his stern face.

"Is there a problem, Auditor?" I know very well that there is a problem but I have to stick to formalities.

"Yes," he responds straightforwardly. "I come for the refugees outside the city."

"Then speak."

"The refugees have been loitering around the city walls for many days. It's a pitiful situation but our soldiers not only refuse to help, they even use violence against them." His head snaps up.

"Tis not the deed of a proper human being!"

I meet his indignant and sorrowful eyes with my own emotionless ones. His mouth is still open as if wanting to say more.

I hum lightly in reply. "So what do you think should be done?"

I know Song Ruoming doesn't know too much about warfare. He has only heard a bit here and there when he, Pei Yuan and I used to hang around together. Therefore, it's obvious that I'm putting him in his place today.

He pales and looks straight at me without a word.

Only after an uncomfortable silence does he say under his breath, "I understand that it is a dilemma but those are citizens of Rui nonetheless. We cannot just sit by and watch. Let them live, please, O benevolent emperor."

I tighten my grip on the arm of the *ta*. "How?"

"The refugees are being herded by the Yan without food or water. At least..." His voice trails off but abruptly rises. "We could throw clothes and food down to solve their urgent needs."

"Also, I implore Your Majesty to give orders to stop the soldiers from shooting at the refugees!" His face flushes red and the pitch of his voice spikes. "How could our soldiers shoot at the harmless citizens of our own country?!"

I smile and flip over a tea cup¹⁷¹. "Go on."

He seems to be shocked for a second before his face turns deadly pale. "How could You be so calm, Your Majesty? These are all *people* we're talking about!"

I turn my head to not look at him. He straightens up and crawls forward on his knees. His lips are quivering as he screams, "Your Majesty, the more You hesitate now the more refugees are going to die outside the city!"

I wipe my smile off. "Perhaps you were not aware that **I** was the one who ordered the shooting!"

He comes to a full stop as he watches me with wide eyes and shaking shoulders.

"**I** am tired. You are dismissed." I stay put.

After a momentary daze, he roars, "Are You really so cold and heartless, Your Majesty? Those are all lives!" He jumps to his feet. "They cry day and night only for some food for their stomachs and some clothes for the cold!"

He slowly approaches while pointing outside. His face is so contorted that it scares me. "Listen, please. They're right outside. Their cries can drive someone crazy. They have no food, no clothes and live under the terror of the Yan! The capital of their country is right in front of them but they can't go in. Our soldiers can't protect them and now they even shoot at them? Where is the justice?! Where is the morality?! Where is the humanity?!"

"Enough!" I bark.

"Do you know how many people are in the city?! Do you know how much food is left?! Do you know how fast the Yan cavalry are?! The gates won't be able to close once they are opened! **I** want to be benevolent too! **I** want there to be justice too! **I** want there to be morality too!" I throw my sleeve down in fury. "**I** can give them food, but then what about the people in the city? Do you

know how long the siege will last? Do you know what they will do to breach the city? Do you know how many more will come?!”

“**I** am the son of God and **I** have to take responsibility for everyone. Which weighs more, the lives out there or the one million lives in here?!”

Tears are brimming in his eyes. He’s as pale as a ghost and his hands are shaking nonstop. Finally, he falls onto his knees. “I am begging You, Your Majesty. Just give them something. Just a little. So they can stay alive...”

I take a deep breath and turn to face the wall. “Song Ruoming, you said they can drive a person crazy but have you really seen bloodshed? Have you seen the flash of a sword flying at you? Xu Zheng and twenty thousand men died on the battlefield. For what? For just three days! All so that the Yan would arrive at our city three days later! So that we have three more days to strengthen our defenses!” I spit venomously. “Did they ever say anything? No! They knew death was waiting for them! But they had no complaints! They all knew there cannot be survivors in an overturning ship!”

“If the refugees are so important, why did you not do anything about it before? All of you people know how to kneel there and intimidate **me** now, so why did you not try intimidating the empress dowager back then? **I** began taking refugees in since the day **I** ascended. Have **I** not done enough? The refugees have been around for such a long time, do you think it can all of a sudden be solved now? Where were you all when the floods plagued the South and took away the people’s homes?!”

“Those soldiers laid down their lives to salvage the country from destruction and now you want to push the country back to its destruction for those refugees?!” I’m practically screaming on the top of my lungs now. “Once the capital falls, it will be smooth sailing for the Yan. Do *not* tell me they can’t fight in water¹⁷²! That is all bullshit!”

Song Ruoming is staring down at the ground while trembling furiously.

I let out a deep breath and take a few steps back. “**I** shall overlook your disrespect towards **me** today. Get out and tell those auditors that this is **my** answer.”

He stays kneeling and starts sobbing quietly. I spin around. “Go find the Minister of Revenue and see how much he can afford to give you. However, let me make this clear that this will not happen again!”

“Th-thank You, Y-Your Majesty...”

The shouting has completely exhausted me. I fall onto the ground as shock and sorrow stirs in my heart. My mind is an utter mess and my body is numb and stiff. I can’t feel a thing.

Throwing down provisions and giving a helping hand and then letting them fend for themselves, ignoring them and shooting them down when they cross the boundary—is this right or wrong?

Cold sweat drips down my back. I can’t process a single thought and just feel so hopeless. I’ve treaded carefully and racked my brains, calculated and plotted every step of the way, only to come to this dilemma.

It is wrong.

But what would make it right?

They all look to me to give them a way out.

But who is going to give me a way out?

Liu An comes in and jumps in alarm after seeing me on the ground. He reaches out to help me up but I shake my head weakly. I don't even want to talk so he edges out of the room.

I hug myself tight and curl my knees in, hiding my face in them.

The emperor is always determined and ruthless. No one ever sees the conflict and suffering inside.

I'm so tired. So cold. I just want to fall asleep and never wake up.

For a moment, it is as if I've gone back to that night when blazing flames were before me and murderous blades were behind me. It was perilous whether I advanced or retreated. There was nowhere for me to go.

I will never again have that embrace that held me warmly and brought me out of the reach of the sinister night terrors.

The next thing I know, I hear the horn blowing in my dream and I wake with a start.

¹⁶³ 昭豫 (*zhao1 yu4*), literally 'bright comfort.' This is her title not name.

¹⁶⁴ 青昭 (*qing1 zhao1*), literally 'green/blue brightness' or 'young brightness.' This is an era name implemented by Emperor Shun.

¹⁶⁵ 清風 (*qing1 feng1*), literally 'light wind' or simply 'breeze.'

¹⁶⁶ She uses the informal second-person pronoun.

¹⁶⁷ 西直 (*xi1 zhi1*), literally 'west straight.'

¹⁶⁸ This is the first time he has referred to himself with the emperor's pronoun in his inner thought.

¹⁶⁹ When delivering an item to the emperor, the item must go through the emperor's personal servant so as to avoid any secret contraptions/poisons on the item and direct contact between the giver and the emperor. This process has been abbreviated here.

¹⁷⁰ 3am to 5am.

¹⁷¹ Tea cups are usually kept face down so the inside stays clean until it is used.

¹⁷² He is referring to the Qihe River that lies north of Yening, the city they had originally planned to relocate the capital to.

XXXV: Vertiginous

I snap to attention and shoot up, the howl of the horn reverberating in my ears.

Dashing out the door, I startle the Golden Guardians standing guard but immediately, they run after me.

A sprinting soldier approaches me and gets down on one knee. “Your Majesty.”

“What is it?”

“Auditor Song led several dozens of other auditors in throwing out supplies to the refugees at An Shang¹⁷³ Gate and caused a mob. The refugees and our soldiers were in a light scuffle when the Yan suddenly attacked.”

“What is the situation now?”

“The Yan started attacking Zhong Shan¹⁷⁴ Gate while the auditors are fighting with the lieutenant. Things are chaotic now and Marshal Heng is on his way over there.”

My stomach twists anxiously.

Song Ruoming, why did you have to pick An Shang Gate out of all the gates?!

I get dressed speedily with the help of the servants and by the time I finish, a eunuch has already brought over a horse. I race through the city while my guards yell at the people to clear the path. The rickety ride rocks my mind back and forth into a mess.

An Shang is the weakest gate of the capital since it was completely ruined by warfare many years ago. Afterwards, the Ministry of Works never paid much effort into rebuilding it due to corrupt politics. The defensive requirement was ignored: no barbicans were built and the gate serves little purpose. Although we have dedicated a lot into repairing it, it takes more than a few cold days for a glacier to form—it couldn’t possibly be fixed over just a day or two.

I pucker my brows as I try to figure this thing out: was it Song Ruoming who chose An Shang Gate or was it the Yan?

Song Ruoming does not know much about warfare. Everything he has done is according to his own will. He must have chosen to pass out the clothes and food when he saw that there were a lot of refugees near An Shang.

Why would all the refugees be there out of the twelve gates?

The Yan could herd the refugees as they wished so...

I tighten my grip on the reins.

Then there is only one possible answer.

As I approach An Shang Gate, I see fires blazing and hear deafening roars. The walls are in chaos: the armed soldiers are in deadlock with a bunch of auditors wearing their court uniforms. Neither side backs down. A person, most likely the lieutenant, is pointing a nocked bow at the field outside the gate, and across from him is none other than Song Ruoming.

I don't even know what to say about these auditors. All they do is stir up trouble when there is none and add to the problem when there is one.

The shrieks down there are mixed in with howls and the sound of heavy impact. The Yan must be hitting the gate with a battering ram.

The order to shoot down refugees caused a large uproar when it was announced and some elderly officials even exclaimed, "How coldblooded!" under their breaths.

The situation today is that the Yan are amongst the refugees so our soldiers can't shoot recklessly. Not to mention, there are a bunch of auditors mixed in the ordeal.

The lieutenant's veins bulge out on his forehead out of frustration. He draws the bow back more but Song Ruoming stands there, self-composed with his back to the crenel.

I can't hold it in any longer. "Get out of **my** way!"

This startles everyone and they turn in my direction before getting down on their knees. Only Song Ruoming remains standing with his lips clipped. I step over all the kneeling people and lean out on the crenel.

The refugees below have formed a stampede, scurrying around like blind bats. There are some elderly and children amongst them. The land a bit farther away looks as if it has been plowed through. Many corpses are scattered about, dabbed with the colour of dirt and trampled over so much that no feature remains distinguishable.

The soldiers were already unhappy about the shooting order and now with these reckless auditors, they are not shooting at all. The Yan have taken this time to attack.

The escalades have already been set up against the smooth wall and footmen are rushing to charge up. Under the cover of shieldmen, the battering ram builds up momentum and smashes into the gate again and again with incredible power.

The two rows of bowmen are all ready but I can see the conflicting conscience in their eyes.

I hiss between clenched teeth, "Song Ruoming, get out of **my** way."

"I can't do that, Your Majesty!"

The earth starts to tremble rhythmically and a deep, dull sound resonates from below.

A line-up of heavy cavalry equipped with impenetrable armour that covers their horses as well seems to form a solid wall underneath the sunshine, even casting a thick shadow on the ground. They are not galloping at high speeds but are instead advancing one step at a time at a unified and collected pace, beating against the heart not too quickly nor too slowly.

"Kill!" The cavalymen start to howl in unison, all collected as one.

They aren't looking to charge forth. Instead, they are going to push the refugees towards the city and use them as their human shield.

"Help!" One person shouts. Instantly, the scream starts multiplying like a virus. Every refugee is scampering towards the city to escape from the metal hooves of the cavalry. They mingle in with the soldiers, desperately clawing at the flat wall.

The gate shakes and clangs with each impact, the metal chains clinking nonstop. Soldiers are yelling as they run amidst the flying swords and blood. Meanwhile, I, those auditors, the lieutenant and Song Ruoming seem to be in an alternate reality as we stay locked in this confrontation. It is actually so silly.

"I am saying this one last time, Song Ruoming. Move."

He stubbornly shakes his head, his eyes filled with the iron-willed look I'm familiar with. He is making a meaningless request of mercy for those refugees with his own life.

Should I be glad or sad to have such an auditor?

He hasn't changed but I have.

"Guards," I speak through gritted teeth. "Send Auditor Song back to his manor."

The soldiers beside me lunge forth. Song Ruoming struggles as he is being dragged away. His voice is almost hoarse. "No! Your Majesty! No!"

I already have the title of being coldblooded. Why not give them the whole package?

I snatch the bow from the lieutenant and dart over to the edge of the wall, nocking the arrow. The people behind me gasp out loud, to which I snap around and glare at them. "If you are too scared to shoot, I will do it with you!"

They all stare in bewilderment at me.

I scan them and scoff. "Are you all deaf or blind? Did you not hear **my** orders? Can you not see what is going on down there? If they do not die, we will!"

The next second, I release and the arrow shoots out as a bright flash, zooming through the air towards its target.

Someone lets out a painstaking scream but it quickly gets engulfed in the crowd.

"Release!" I bellow.

The lieutenant raises an arm and the bowmen step forward with eyes about to pop out from their sockets. Immediately, a shower of glistening arrowtips flies out over the people outside the city.

One round.

And then another.

It has become the land of the dead down below. Refugees and soldiers alike fall like dead weeds before they even realise what is going on. Dust dances in the air. Wails shake the heavens.

I close my eyes and the bow falls from my hand, hitting the ground with a crisp sound.

I can even hear the hissing sounds of hot blood spraying out. I don't want to look at anyone's eyes, whether they have guilt, blame or anger in them. It has nothing to do with me.

My hands have been stained once again with the blood of the innocent.

I shuffle forward stiffly.

I'll just leave this to them. I've already done my share. Don't need to worry about soldiers disobeying my orders again.

They clear a path for me. Everyone bows their heads and holds their tongues respectfully wherever I go.

Do they respect me or my identity? Or just my cold-hearted, callous ways?

I don't want to look and I don't want to think. I just want to get away from here. Away from this hell.

My personal guards trail far behind me quietly.

Amidst the lightheadedness, I can't see anything and all I feel is this cold chill spreading from the bottom of my heart. I take a hard fall as I turn the corner of the stairs. I fall limp and slump against the city wall. Feeling the cold sweat dripping down my back, I close my eyes. I don't want to see anything.

The guards haven't drawn near, leaving me alone, panting.

"Murong Yu..." I mumble. I don't even know what the hell I'm saying anymore.

Someone is calling for me. I can faintly hear 'Your Majesty' but I don't want to listen. I just pant while holding onto the wall for support.

The person is still moving in front of me as a strange voice enters my ears. Suddenly frustrated, I stagger forward a few steps while holding onto the wall. I just want to get away from him but the person keeps following me. With my back against the cold wall, I slide down to the ground.

This is the first time I shot someone since ascension. My hands are stained with the blood of Rui citizens.

The Xie family, the Xu family, the disobedient officials and those maids and attendants—I've killed plenty and I had felt guilty, but never regretful.

But now, I regret it.

I slowly lower my hands from my eyes and stare dumbly at them. For a split second, I think I see rusty red on them.

I'm not a good emperor.

I can't save everyone.

I'm tired.

There seems to be a bit of despair that begins to extend from my heart to the rest of my body.

The person reaches out as though to help me up. I shake my head. A light sigh enters my ears and a shadow looms over me. Before I know it, I've been pulled up and someone's warm hand is holding tightly onto mine. I'm led away by him like that to somewhere.

It's as if I'm walking through a foggy night. Bright signal torches suddenly appear before me, glowing in a sickly green colour. From the skies above, an ocean of blood comes roaring towards me to drown me.

Where are you, Murong Yu? Why have you still not come yet?

I don't want anything. I just want you to come and take me away from this terrible nightmare.

It's his figure reaching out his hand from afar. I reach out to grab it but I lose my vision. The pull of gravity disappears for a moment and I snap my eyes open. Drapes are pulled low around the bed; I'm in my sleeping quarters and Murong Yu is nowhere to be seen.

I spring up to find my outer robes gone, leaving only the inner ones.

Recalling the dream earlier, I still feel my body temperature fluctuating wildly and the sweat wetting my clothes.

Liu An lifts up the drapes. "Ah, You're awake."

I let out a deep breath and jump off the bed. Liu An quickly helps me into an outer robe.

"How long was I asleep for?"

"Two hours."

I walk over to the window and push it open, a cool breeze bursting in. I suddenly remember what had happened and can't help but sigh. How could I be so stupid and lose my composure when there are so much for me to do? But I am curious as to whose hand it was that held mine.

I accidentally glance past the screen and see the figure standing in the other part of the room.

It's—

"Your Majesty left and was gone for quite some time. It was Marshal Heng who brought You back," he tells me quietly. "You were not Yourself at the time and did not recognize anybody. The cleaning and changing were all done by him."

I stand there, too stunned for words.

He's standing right there, his presence like a silent guardian.

I give my face a rub as I walk out. "Marshal," I call.

His frame shakes before he spins around. He doesn't perform the rituals and just smiles. "Good morning."

I smile back. "I owe You much for today."

Heng Ziyu doesn't show any surprise. "I've said, I will be by Your Majesty's side no matter what."

I nod and he flashes a toothy grin, looking at ease, which is rare to see. I don't think I've ever seen him as relaxed as he is now. I always remember him having a frown and tightly pressed lips.

He's still there, standing at a reachable distance away from me.

"How are things at An Shang?"

"We have temporarily held off the Yan's attack."

"How are the men?"

"In good spirits."

I take a deep breath to steady my mood. "Marshal, what do you¹⁷⁵ think of **my** actions?"

His gaze darkens and he sighs. "I understand Your difficulties, Your Majesty."

I turn my head away to not see those concerned eyes. A short sigh and four little words make me want to look into those eyes of his. There is a weak bond of trust. There is a secret alliance.

However, he's been standing behind me¹⁷⁶ without a complaint, like how he is still on my side now no matter how much the others blame and curse me.

Maybe I should say thanks to him even if it's out of political appropriateness.

I've changed and I've lost many things along the way. The ones that remain after going through so many hardships seem all the more precious.

He takes a step closer. "Your Majesty, if I may, I ask that You come to the battlements now."

I look back at him, at the face I'm so familiar with—the sharp, contrasted features, strong brows, animated eyes—and I feel as though the dizziness earlier never even happened.

He holds my hand in his and explains earnestly, "You lost composure at the battlements and although I escorted You back, it would be the best to go again now that You are all right to reassure the soldiers and the people."

His hands move to my shoulders and he keeps his keen gaze on me. I open my mouth but I have nothing to say.

Indeed, I should go. It's my responsibility.

The warmth that comes from his body drives away my shivers. I close my eyes and say with fatigue, "Okay."

"Going after a few more hours' rest is fine, too, if Your Majesty still feels tired," he adds gently.

I open my eyes and look into his eyes. They are void of the usual hawk-like air but are instead warm and full of earnest worry like he truly cares for me.

"You don't look too well," he says as he reaches towards my face.

I hurriedly step back, leaving his hand in midair. He shows some surprise but it disappears from his face in an instant.

But I saw it. That fervent gaze in which the usual calmness and control is nowhere to be found. He was like a totally different person.

"If You could just step aside momentarily, I am going to get dressed." I lower my eyes and turn away from him.

He opens his mouth to say something but in the end he leaves without a word.

I sigh. I really hope I am mistaken.

A gaze like that is too reckless and taboo; it is not what a subject should have for his ruler.

After washing up, I don the armour again and head to An Shang Gate on horse with Heng Ziyu.

I tell him about my speculations along the way and he frowns as he listens.

"So what You're saying is that it was not a coincidence that the refugees gathered at An Shang Gate," he confirms in a low voice.

I nod. "That is why I suspect that it's likely that there are Yan agents in the city."

"We have been searching for agents since the beginning but the population is so high it is almost impossible to go through everybody," he analyses. "Not to mention, the agents must have been planted a long time ago if the Yan are bent on absorbing Great Rui."

I glimpse the civilians cowering on the side of the road and sigh. How troublesome. It's likely that what happened today will happen again if there are agents. Additionally, their actions would directly affect the civilians.

I remember Murong Yu saying that the city might be dead but the people in it are alive. This is what he must have meant.

As we approach An Shang Gate, a pungent odour of blood stings my nose. Many army doctors are carrying heavily wounded soldiers down. Broken weapons and limbs are scattered everywhere and the stairs are coated with blood.

After I get to the top, I let out a loud gasp. The moat is stuffed with floating corpses whose faces cannot be discerned. Bodies are strewn all over the vast plains a bit farther off in the distance, most of which are defenseless refugees and not Yan soldiers. The smell of dead bodies circulates in the air below like ghouls with a strong grudge.

There are even some moving amongst the piles of corpses. They extend out their bony hands and painstakingly crawl across a surface made of blood and broken bones. The battlefield exudes a foul odour from the rotting bodies of the past few days. Bones peek out from underneath the armour of the deceased soldiers and their weapons stay stuck in the soil, forming a sparsely grown forest.

Our soldiers are dirty and grimy as though they've just come back from hell. They are quivering but they stay upright like statue. The eyes that are shadowed by their helmets are wild and bloodshot.

The Yan army are still there in the distance. Without attacking, the cavalry succeeded in making the refugees run around like crazed bulls simply by coordinating the rhythm of their steps. The sunlight dances wildly off of their steel black helmets as they stand there in silence, forming a massive line of offense that stretches for several *li* like obsidian statues or a solid metal wall.

The endless, black ocean starts to stir from the nearby plains and a black flag rises into the wind, the emblem of an eagle blazing brightly.

An emblem with an eagle—the soaring bird was on *his* armour as well.

“The emblem of the eldest prince of Yan.” Heng Ziyu's eyes darken. “A man like the eagle.”

The ocean that is the Yan army suddenly scatters out as though in fear of something. Two people come forth on horses, one ahead of the other, until the forefront. The man in front is wearing the familiar, glistening silver armour and is mounted on an ink black warhorse. Wielding a *zhanma*¹⁷⁷ sabre, he draws closer from afar. His cape billows wildly in the brisk wind, appearing august and awesome as he approaches.

My heart is pounding furiously and I feel as if an invisible hand is choking my neck. I glue my gaze on that slowly moving figure and shudder.

It's him. It's him. It's—

The black ocean of cavalry moves along with him, making the earth below shake with fury and driving up dust and dirt into a yellow storm. The ground quakes with every step, as if everything is

going to crumble into pieces underneath their hooves. Whether it be bodies or bones, everything will be pulverised.

I close my fist tightly while a deep melancholy rises from the bottom of my heart, putting so much pressure on me that I can't breathe.

I've pictured countless times what it would be like meeting again but I would have never thought it would be in the presence of thousands of soldiers. Seeing a figure that resembled him was enough to make me collapse but now that the real thing has come, I'm still standing tall on the battlement.

I still cannot distinguish his features from this distance so I trust that he cannot see mine either.

I just want to leave. You can call me weak or you can call me spineless, I just don't want to stay here waiting for that heartrending moment to come. But my feet are glued to the ground. I can't budge a single inch and can only watch dumbly as he gets closer and closer.

I'm not mistaken. It is him in the flesh.

In that moment, he looks up. We gaze at each other from afar and it's as if there is a million miles between us.

I whisk my head around, unable to continue.

"Your Majesty?"

I shake my head while breathing hard, evading Heng Ziyu's eyes. I start backing away. I do not have the courage to keep looking. A wave of dizziness hits me and a bitter emotion eats into my heart.

There are so many other people here. I don't need to be here. Let me go. Let me go—

Heng Ziyu grabs my wrist extremely hard. "What's the matter with You, Your Majesty?"

I fling his hand away as the world before me turns fuzzy. My mind is blank. There is only me left in this whole universe. A chill starts to creep through my body and lingers stubbornly.

"Your Majesty, please keep it together!"

Yes, I want to keep myself together, too. Could someone teach me how? I grit my teeth and push the garbled feelings down into my heart that feels like it is being shredded to pieces. Didn't I already know this moment was going to come? But why am I still so fearful?

I close my eyes and sigh.

Oh well. Fate has decided everything and you have accepted your fate, right?

I just hope to face this while calm and collected so as to not put shame on my name and the royal blood within me.

Slowly, I open my eyes. He has halted his horse. He's too far and all I can tell is that he has a serious expression.

Murong Yu, I only ask that you don't recognize that this person is me.

Our deadlock¹⁷⁸ is momentary and eternal.

He has stopped outside the range of the bowmen with heavy cavalry on either side of him, as well as the shieldmen in position. Behind him, Yuwen Yuan raises his saber and the ocean of

cavalry starts to boil. Some hit their spear hilts against the ground while others knock their sabers and bows against their saddles, roaring, "Kill!"

Their deafening roar completely overwhelms everything else around them. Low and daunting, it is even making the walls vibrate.

That eagle is still soaring in the wind.

Slowly, Murong Yu raises his hand and they all fall quiet in an instant, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

He announces in a booming voice, "This is the Prince Royal of Yan, Prince Lie, Murong Yu. Presently, our army has surrounded this city and victory is inevitable. There is no benefit for you to fight as it only serves to stall your deaths. Surrender the city at once, or else," his voice suddenly rises, "the day the city falls will be the day you perish!"

Everyone looks to me.

I take a deep breath and shout back, "Hear **my** words, Prince Lie of Yan down below, there is no need for chitchat. We welcome your attack for we shall die before surrendering! **I** stand here today, if the capital dies, then **I** shall die alongside every soldier and every citizen in this city! If God forbids and the city falls, we shall make you crawl through your own blood every step of the way! Better to die in glory than to live in vain!"

My passionate voice echoes while he stays quiet and looks in my direction. I can't see his expression or his eyes clearly. Once the words left my mouth, I actually feel calm and composed, as if I have nothing to fear.

It's so quiet it seems everything around me is frozen.

Suddenly, he yanks hard on the reins to charge forth but Yuwen Yuan is one step ahead of him and grabs him.

No kidding. Of course he can tell that from my voice.

I feel my eyes getting wet but I want to laugh for some reason.

This moment has finally come.

"Warriors, hear **my** orders! Those who back away are not sons of Great Rui; those who let even one Yan soldier past our gates will be the shame of Great Rui. And those who sacrifice themselves today shall be heroes!"

I feel his piercing gaze on me, as sharp as a blade, as bright as lightning, threatening to puncture my armour and penetrate my soul.

"If so, we shall see it through to the end and see who gets the last laugh!" Yuwen Yuan sounds as cold as always but I think he's smiling. "I look forward to our meeting then!"

I clench my teeth and pull back, the soldiers taking my place immediately.

Any more talk now is only futile. We cannot go back to before. We have already become enemies of one another. Well, more accurately, we were enemies since the beginning. What happened before is just a story of the past.

I didn't have the courage to think what kind of distress meeting him would cause. Only when, out of nowhere, he was really standing before me did I truly understand that the times past¹⁷⁹ cannot return just as yesterday will never come again.

No, never again.

I can't help but take one more look. He has already turned his horse around and rode into the mass of soldiers. The thin flake of snow that is his silver helmet is quickly engulfed by the black, metallic ocean, gradually leaving without a trace.

He disappears from my sight without even once turning back to look.

In a few moments' time, he has already gone from loving to hating me.

I'll just blame it on my being thin on love. I'll...

Just let him hate me from now on so I can wait for that day, if it does come, when I can die without a single regret or worry for this world.

By the end of the day, the Yan army of two hundred thousand strong has gathered at the capital—now only a stranded island.

¹⁷³ 安上 (*an1 shang4*), literally 'peace above.'

¹⁷⁴ 中山 (*zhong1 shan1*), literally 'middle mountain.'

¹⁷⁵ He uses the informal second person pronoun here.

¹⁷⁶ In the sense that Heng Ziyu has his back through everything.

¹⁷⁷ Literally, "horse chopping." More information: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhanmadao>

¹⁷⁸ The author uses the same word as the name of chapter 2.

¹⁷⁹ The author uses the same word as the name of chapter 6.

XXXVI: Confrontation

“our Majesty.”

I take the wine glass and my eyes skim past the rim to Heng Ziyu who is sitting beside me.

I haven't gone back to the palace and insisted on staying here. Although I came up with a bunch of elaborate reasons but I guess I unconsciously just want to be a little closer to *him*.

I scoff lightly. How close could I possibly get though?

I take a small sip. The sweetness of this wine lingers in my mouth for a long time.

“You don't look too well,” he remarks as he holds his glass, not drinking from it. I can feel his intense gaze on me even though I have my head lowered. Acting as though I haven't heard him, I smartly change the subject.

“This wine, it's *bagui*¹⁸⁰ wine.”

“A delicacy of the South.” He cracks a smile. “Fragrant and alluring but one would not become intoxicated no matter how much she drinks; this wine was originally made for the noblewomen at banquets.”

I drink it all in one gulp. “I am glad You are still in the mood for such pleasures.”

He just smiles without replying. I glance at the soldiers walking to and from while playing with the glass, and lose the appetite to drink. Just now, I had felt powerful and sat tall but now my body is turning cold—cold and lonely.

“Your Majesty, if I may ask, why are You so glum? Do you have something on Your mind?” Heng Ziyu's voice calls me back to reality. I look up at his concerned eyes but only shake my head a little.

He pushes after a pause, “You can confide in me if You trust me.”

Without replying, I close my eyes and continue rubbing the cool glass. My disguise must not adequate enough after all for him to be able to see through it. Of course, I'm exasperated but more likely, I feel helpless.

“I understand it is very difficult for You. I would like to do my best to help with Your troubles since we're on the same team.”

He places his hand on my arm and refills the wine without another word.

The confidence and poise I have been faking immediately crumbles to nothingness and all that's left behind in me is bitterness and fatigue.

I down the glass of liquor, the sugary alcohol turning bitter as it slides down my throat.

"Well, it's nothing really. Just missing someone, that's all." I don't want to look at him. Then, after a moment, I chuckle. "Just a thing of the past."

He refills the glass and comments, "That sounds like nothing but missing someone is taxing and the most painful."

I laugh carelessly and pour more wine for myself, drinking it all with the bottom up.

"Could it be that You're missing the owner of the *xiao*? If the two of you share the same feelings, You can just bring her back to the palace and marry her, right?" He has a small smile but his eyes say otherwise. They look a bit odd.

"I said it's a thing of the past." Staring at the tiles, I scoff with a bit of self-mockery. "We couldn't stand each other when we first met and arguments and bickering were commonplace. Even though there were some feelings in the bloom, I had no idea."

"And then?" he asks.

I laugh with the aid of the alcohol buzz. "And then? And then we went our separate ways. Separated for good and never to meet again." The pain is so much that I smile instead. "No matter how strong the love, it can never stand against time or destiny."

I squint and continue as though I'm talking to myself, "Sometimes **I** look back and think that **I** was really stubborn. **I** mean, why did **I** leave when **I** had love?" I heave a deep sigh. "Look at **me** now. We shouldn't meet and we can't meet¹⁸¹."

"Can't You rekindle old flames?"

"It's too late." I stare at the patterns on the glass and scoff. "That person thinks **I**'ve betrayed and lied. **I** won't be forgiven."

He just watches me quietly. I pour glass after glass down into my stomach. It's so bitter I can't even begin to describe it.

"Stop, Your Majesty."

He snatches my glass away and grabs my wrist. Annoyed, I tear my arm away. He sweeps his hand across and the bottle flies out and shatters into bits and pieces.

After the crack, I hear his voice coming from behind. "There will be time to drink after the war if Your Majesty wants to do so. You are the role model of the court officials and the head of our people. You cannot--"

Responsibility this, duty that. Every word he says just makes me ache more. I can't handle this torture.

"Enough!" I push his hand away.

"Everyone tells me¹⁸² I have responsibilities, I have duties, I have to be responsible for this country! But did anyone consider if I wanted to do this or not?" I chuckle. "Yes! I'm the emperor but I'm also a person!"

“I’m forced to accept responsibilities that weren’t supposed to be mine. I can’t live my own life. I have to sacrifice my everything. And what am I left with when I take off that crown? Nothing, I tell you¹⁸³!”

I tilt my head back and smile bitterly.

He is still, his hand in midair, as he watches me.

I feel so miserable but I have to smile. I don’t want to lose all my composure but it’s not something I can easily hold back.

Every sentence and every word digs and grinds into me.

“Your Majesty...” Guilt flashes across his eyes.

Trying to repress the melancholy, I feel cold and exhausted. “I am tired and do not wish to continue this talk. I will leave this to—”

Before I get to finish, I feel turbulence in the air whooshing past my ear.

“Careful!”

Suddenly, a booming sound rocks the world. Heng Ziyu lunges forward and catches my wobbling body. The two of us fall hard onto the ground. I’m sprawled out on the ground, frightened and angry. I try to lift my head up but he presses down over me, shielding me.

I hear bewildered shouts and the sound of something heavy hitting the ground. There’s thick, stinging smoke in the air and even little embers. I can’t see anything and the weight on top of me makes it hard to breathe.

“Wh-what’s going on?”

“Please, please remain calm, Your Majesty.”

Heng Ziyu is still lying on my back. I twist my neck around to look and I feel another violent attack. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a huge flaming rock falling from the sky and exploding, the blazing flames seeming to lick me. The burning fragments from the impact scatter over the battlements like a rain of fire.

I do a double take and clutch his sleeves. “Are we under attack?”

He purses his lips and looks down at me, his breath hitting my face. His mouth opens and his eyes stay locked on me as if to say something but before he can, there is another deafening boom accompanied by a whistle and blast of scorching air. The two of us both start and he flattens himself, protecting me with his body. He holds my hand tightly and stiffens himself. Despite his slow breathing, I can still feel the broiling heat.

His eyes are right there but I don’t want to look at them.

The sharp yelling is still around me, along with showers of embers and black, looming smoke that seems to have swallowed everything. Burning chunks keep falling down from the sky and landing in front of me.

After who knows how long...

Right when I feel like I’m going to suffocate or choke to death, the weight on me suddenly disappears. I take big breaths of air as I’m helped up. Heng Ziyu beside me is looking off elsewhere and his face is flushed, probably from the thick smoke.

Our eyes meet for a moment before dancing apart. I walk towards the battlements but wobble from a violent burst of air. A soldier steadies me, advising, "The Yan are catapulting burning rocks and have lit fires by the moat. The air is thick with smoke. It's best if Your Majesty didn't go!"

Heng Ziyu bends over a little and coughs before going up to the battlements in large strides, ignoring all the voices persuading him not to.

From this elevated position, I see that a dark veil of smoke has risen around the city. Blazing fires can be seen from time to time as thick clouds of smoke shoot skyward, like a huge, black curtain enshrouding the battlements and our vision. The pungent odour of burning pine oil wafts over as fireballs fly through the sky overhead before exploding. The soldiers yelp as they scatter and scamper to dodge the flaming bits.

The rocks are heavy and hot and cause serious injuries when hit. It also has the acidic tang of sulphur that makes one's eyes tear. The bowmen on the walls not only cannot see what is going on outside but they also can't aim. With their eyes red and swollen from the smoke, they can only fire blindly.

"We can't aim properly like this, Marshal."

Heng Ziyu shouts back determinedly, "Doesn't matter! Just shoot!"

Another person dashes to him, falling to his knees. "Marshal! The Yan are shooting burning rocks covered with beef tallow at the gate. The flames grew and immediately surrounded the entire gate!"

"The gates are solid steel!"

"Yes! But the impact from the rocks is too much. The gates are shaking furiously from it and could fall apart any moment now. We're trying to hold it back but it's too hot!"

The Yan footmen navigate through the layers of smoke and cross the moat, using hooked ladders to climb the walls. Our soldiers, despite choking and crying from the smoke, are still holding the defensive line. More and more people clash at sword's point. Blades stab into flesh and blood splatters out along with a shiny flash from the metal that has become red from the flames from all around.

The onslaught continues through the whole night.

The catapults keep launching burning rocks and wood towards the city. Several hundred thousand *jīn*¹⁸⁴ of lumber are lumped against the walls, aflame, the roaring fire illuminating the starless night. The sky looks as if it were about to catch on fire and fall upon the earth.

Close to dawn, flames spark amidst the smoke and as the earth shudders violently along with the sound of shattering stone and crackling wood, Xi Zhi Gate breaks open. Numerous lighthorses surge in, forcing the Rui soldiers there to use themselves as bait to lure them into the barbican. Countless bowmen fire in unison from up above and the arrows fall down like a storm. Men and horses wail as they die and all that is left in the barbican are mounds of bodies.

Heng Ziyu takes the lead and commands the retaliation from the walls.

Under the furious attack, both sides have gone into a state of bloody frenzy, metamorphosing into beasts as they howl and leap at each other. The Yan forces outside the city are held back by the

arrow shower and become unable to manoeuvre. The entire wall is ablaze, the stone walls having caught on fire at last.

The last round of the hysterical assault finally comes to a close near daybreak.

Heng Ziyu descends the wall, his armour stained with blood. It glows faintly red under the day's first rays, bathing him in a bloody mist. Holding his steel sabre, he falls to his knees several steps away from me.

Painstakingly, I give him a nod as I hold his gaze.

It doesn't matter what I want or what he wants; how he sees me or how I see him; or what we think of each other, we completely agree on this one thing.

The heavily wounded are brought down for medical help. The Ministry of Revenue amasses workers to bury the corpses. By noontime, all bodies have been transported to an open area. The workers haul over the bodies, piling them in layers and spraying oils on each one. The layers become a mountain which the soldiers are pouring pine oil on. A crowd of mourners hold their heads low in the far end and the young soldiers can't help their shivering.

"It is finished, Marshal." A soldier drops on one knee before Heng Ziyu, to which he hums a reply.

I am so exhausted I don't even want to talk. I mutter without moving my lips too much, "Light it."

With my order, my soldiers encircle the mound of corpse and pitch their torches out with all their strength. The torches fall on the pine oil and immediately, fire shoots up into the sky and licks at the corpses hungrily with its fiendish tongue. As the flames gyrate, a disgusting smell is emitted, making me want to puke.

I stand there. Heng Ziyu stands there. Everyone just stands there.

The smoke has almost enshrouded the sky. Facing these slowly darkening corpses that are turning into ash, my mind is utterly blank.

How long is this murder going to last?

An eternity seems to have passed.

When the pile has almost burned out, I hold up a glass of wine and shout, "You all are the heroes of Great Rui!" I pour the liquid on the ground.

The soldiers start sobbing quietly and finally, one of the younger ones cannot hold it in anymore. He falls to the ground, bawling. Heng Ziyu's personal guards quickly drag him away but his cries still linger in my ears.

Heng Ziyu comes up to me after the others leave. "What should we do about the Yan soldiers' bodies?"

"Find some place and burn it, too," I utter calmly, "They had fathers and mothers, too. Let us not humiliate the dead."

I continue watching the last, dwindling embers clinging on the ashes. I don't want to speak. He stands beside me without a word. The embers gradually die out in the wind and disappear amidst the cinders.

“What are You thinking about, Your Majesty?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“You don’t look well.”

I pull a thin smile. “Marshal, do You remember what I had told you before?”

He falters a bit before regaining his composure. “Yes.”

“Would you forgive the person if he lied to you and betrayed you?”

“No.”

“And that is why,” I sigh sorrowfully, “it is too late. Now that it has come to this, the old flames cannot be rekindled if a miracle does not happen.”

I know fairly, if not fully, well what kind of person Murong Yu is. I knew before I even met him that what he is after is an empire and to rule that empire. To be able to grow up in a cold, hostile palace and to be able to receive his father’s adoration, it is clear to see how cruel, how conniving and how determined he is.

How could I ever fathom him stopping his advance for Han Xin?

Not to mention, that man named Han Xin is already gone.

The warmth and bond we once had, the intimacy and romance we once had weighs less than a feather when compared to his conquest for this land.

The melancholy overwhelms me and I turn my head, flashing a smile to Heng Ziyu. “Shall we go, Marshal?”



It is already the latter half of November. The autumn showers keep falling restlessly.

Our troops have suffered from the multiple attacks by the Yan, the casualties increasing day after day. The piles of burnt corpses. The blood-dyed walls. Every soldier appears absolutely exhausted. The more despairing thing is that no matter which direction I look in, all I can see is a field of black.

Besieged, the capital has lost contact with the outside world. Even the secret pigeon post has become sparse.

I’ve been debating whether or not to tell Heng Ziyu about the Yan capital, Yongjing. I had it in my mind last night during our meeting and the words were at the tip of my tongue but I gulped it back down in the end.

He looked hesitant as well when he was about to leave, like he wanted to say something. His eyes were unusually bright under the shadows cast by the candlelight.

I’m sitting in Su Yu¹⁸⁵ Chamber surrounded by thin veils from all around, the Imperial Lake not far from sight. The moist air blows through the chamber and causes rings upon rings of ripples on the water.

A light scent of agarwood wafts in the air, as mild as water. I awoke with a fright in the middle of the night again yesterday, entirely soaked with sweat. My temples are thumping painfully and all I can do is temporarily suppress it with this kind of soothing incense.

Time seems to pass by really fast, or maybe really slow, since the siege started. Out of nowhere, I realise I haven't taken a good look at myself for a long time.

Shaking my head, I get rid of those haphazard thoughts and unfold the memorial.

After Song Ruoming was dragged down and imprisoned in his manor, nobody, not even those usually annoying auditors and conceited officials who have served multiple emperors, dare say a single word about the war. The hair-raising mounds of white skeletons just lie exposed in the dirt under the sun, as though completely forgotten.

Currently, the troops in the capital number just a little above ninety thousand. The Yan troops outside were originally two hundred thousand but now no one knows just how many there are. We have suffered great decreases due to casualties and things don't look very good. The Minister of Defense wrote in a memorial asking for permission to recruit young men into the army and engage in emergency training in preparation as back-up. I granted it.

The only thing that I don't have to worry about is a shortage of food.

It will be winter in less than one month. Yan is in the north and receives snowfall much earlier. I'm sure the Yan troops are more worried about food than I am. The only thing I have to do now is stall them with everything I've got until something happens in Yongjing and wait for problems to come up with their army provisions. But when that would happen, no one knows.

Liu An quietly enters the chamber. "There has been a problem, Your Majesty."

"Hm?"

"Some people have begun showing unusual symptoms since yesterday night: dark colouration on the skin, spasms through the body. It looks like..." he presses his voice lower, "The army doctor with expertise in the area said it looks like poisoning."

I stare at him in surprise. "How many people have showed these symptoms?"

"According to the report, camps One, Two and Four have all showed them."

I'm so stunned that I'm shaking a little. It's not that I didn't think that the Yan would tamper with and envenom the water. It's just that these three camps, numbering around twenty thousand men, are the ones in charge of night duty. There could not possibly be so many people ill in just one night no matter how many spies there were. There are already three camps affected and even though it hasn't caused death, it has only worsened the situation.

"Any deaths?"

He shakes his head, replying quietly, "Unclear as of now. The second lieutenant notified Marshal Heng first and he has gone over there."

"Where are the victims located?"

"Mostly in the northeast of the city. The mayor reported saying that there are quite a few civilians in that area with the same symptoms as well."

My heart starts thumping. The capital's water comes from the mountain ranges in the northeast. The Yan have taken control of the surroundings so it's not surprising that they found the water source.

The food is still plentiful and the young men in the city can be transformed into fighting power but this water problem is a critical hazard. Without water, a city cannot last for a long-term siege.

To poison the water source—my jaw clenches—is just wicked.

Soon after, Heng Ziyu brings an army doctor along to see me. He has a stony expression and only waves his hand without even a word. The doctor steps forth with his back bowed, holding a porcelain platter.

“Any results?”

“Yes.” There is a bowl of clear water on the platter. “It appears to be crow-dipper¹⁸⁶, dried wolfsbane root¹⁸⁷, dried monkshood root¹⁸⁸, poison nut¹⁸⁹, cobra lily¹⁹⁰ and the likes. These herbs are highly poisonous to begin with and the potency only increases when stewed together.”

I hold the bowl up to my nose and sniff it, a faint wisp of herby scent hitting the inside of my nose.

“Those who fall victim to it show symptoms of darkening facial skin, spasms, irritation and respiratory problems. A doctor with experience with poisons said these are exactly the symptoms of having consumed these herbs.

I place the bowl on the table and somehow calm down.

“I have already sent people northeastward to examine every well in the area. These herbs smell like the moss and algae at the bottom of the wells at first sniff so people were not wary.”

“All right. You are dismissed,” orders Heng Ziyu.

The doctor leaves with his back bent. Heng Ziyu sits cross legged across me while staring at that bowl of water. Our eyes meet and without any exchange of words, we understand how serious this is.

“The doctor already said most of it. Allow me to finish the rest.” He coughs. “Three thousand men have fallen ill and are not mobile. Thirty or so dead. Over ten thousand showing symptoms.”

“How many can fight?”

“Three thousand cannot move anymore. The doctors have started to treat the ten thousand or so with milder symptoms but it's nearly impossible to gather the required medicine all of a sudden.”

“Get the Ministry of Revenues to arrange it. There are so many pharmacies and doctors in the city. If it is not enough, there is the Imperial Hospital.”

He nods as I continue looking at him. “Have You investigated the method of poisoning?”

His gaze turns hard after a short silence. “I have. The Yan added the poison into the water source in the northeast. The poison flowed into the city with the water and the soldiers fell victim to it first because they needed to drink during night duty.”

As he says this, his face pales and veins start bulging out. His eyes scream murder.

“How many more days?” I ask after a pause.

“With the amount of rain we have been getting these days, the water flow is quite fast. If the Yan do not continue to add poisons, it should be cleared within ten days.”

I look up at him. “And if they continue to?”

He comes to a full stop, staring at me with bewilderment. I nod weakly and his lips purse together tightly.

It’s so quiet.

The fat drops of rain from the downpour outside hit the thin curtains, quickly soaking them. The candle flames flicker restlessly in the brutal weather before going out in the end.

Darkness falls upon the chamber¹⁹¹. I can’t see his face in the dark, only his eyes that are glowing like stars.

He starts coughing. I have nothing to say to him so I just pour him a cup of hot tea and push it towards him. He nods a bit. “Thanks, Your Majesty.”

“If only we knew, we could have set up a watch by the water source.” I sigh deeply.

“I had already expected that they would poison the water when we started to strengthen the city’s defenses, so I prepared for it. I built canals and a reservoir and the water must pass inspection before it goes to the reservoir.”

I nod, feeling more assured. “To poison a million people is very difficult. Not to mention, the water is moving which means the poison is constantly being washed away, unable to linger.”

“I asked the doctors. The cure is not hard to make and as long as the person pukes it out in time, he will be fine. But it will take some time.” He pauses. “The point is that they—”

“Are trying to force us out,” I finish his sentence.

Heng Ziyu nods a little. “That’s right. Poisoning the water will certainly affect innocent civilians. They see the murders in the past few days but they themselves haven’t been personally involved so they are able to stay calm.”

I feel my mood darkening. He is right. The commoners haven’t reacted strongly solely because there are soldiers protecting them. Once the carnage dawns upon them and they lose faith, we will have one more enemy to deal with.

With that said, there really isn’t anything else to say.

It’s his hoarse voice that disturbs the silence. “Your Majesty, I have something to say.”

I nod while holding the tea cup with both hands. He lowers his head, as if to look at the tea. “I brought eighty thousand men with me when I came up north. This we all know.” He then heaves a long sigh. “And most of them have died in these battles.”

Tiredly, I nod my head and say in a tone that sounds unusually solemn in the darkness. “There are currently only ninety-something thousand soldiers in the city. The Yan still have mounted cavalry, mounted infantry and mounted bowmen. Just from these two points, the result of taking the battle outside of the city seems apparent.”

He hesitates, his eyes flicking to me before flitting away. “Lingzhou. I still have fifty thousand men there. Lighthorse.”

Startled, I snap my head up. In just a moment, I understand what he means.

Indeed, he had other plans when he came up north. He couldn't possibly show his entire hand to the court so he hid a part of it. Even if Great Rui loses half of the kingdom, with his power in the South and the natural barricades of the Qihe River, he would be the last one laughing.

Shivers run through me. Just how many things is this person still hiding from me?

He was born a commoner and as a warrior, to be able to survive amidst the civil officials and nobles, even moving up all the way to the top, he could not have only relied on his deadly sword.

He continues without a rush, "The Yan army is not a solid piece of steel either. Aside from the eldest prince, there are also the second and third princes. Have You ever considered that?"

I close my eyes at the dull pain in my chest. However, an intuitive spark flashes across my mind and it hits me.

The Yan could have done so many other things, why have they chosen to use this method?

Contaminating the water is the last ace up one's sleeves. Results can be seen very quickly but it is too savage. As long as something else can be done, no warfare strategists would recklessly choose to do this.

I believe Yuwen Yuan could do this but Murong Yu...not likely. If he could treat the body of a lord of Great Rui with respect and let the prisoners of war keep wake for him, then he would not do something so evil.

Also, the reports from Master Liao these days seem to tell of something brewing in the dark.

Then there is only one possibility.

The more I think, the clearer it becomes.

That's right!

After I gather everything that has happened in the past days, the puzzle pieces come together perfectly.

Something has happened in Yongjing!

¹⁸⁰ Another name for Guangxi Province.

¹⁸¹ Actually, both phrases translate as "we cannot meet." The first 'cannot' implies that they cannot meet due to external factors (i.e. warring countries) and the second 'cannot' implies self-implemented rules (i.e. Han Xin feels that he cannot due to guilt).

¹⁸² Due to the pronoun drop in Chinese, he hasn't explicitly said a single first-person pronoun in this chapter until now. I will assume he switched to the normal "I" after he drank a bit of wine, but this is the first time he used the normal "I" explicitly so I have bolded the previous "I"s and "me"s.

¹⁸³ He explicitly uses the informal second-person pronoun to refer to Heng Ziyu, the first time doing so since ascension.

¹⁸⁴ Traditional unit of measurement in East Asia, 500g in Mainland China and 600g or 604g in most other places.

¹⁸⁵ 簌玉 (su4 yu4), literally 'rustling jade' or 'trickling jade.' Su is an onomatopoeia describing a rustling sound caused by the wind or the action of tears trickling down.

¹⁸⁶ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinellia_ternata

¹⁸⁷ Chinese wolfsbane, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aconitum_carmichaelii

¹⁸⁸ Kusnezoff monkshood, *Aconitum kusnezoffii*: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aconitum#Species>

¹⁸⁹ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strychnos_nux-vomica

¹⁹⁰ *Arisaema heterophyllum*, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Araceae#Toxicity>

¹⁹¹ The author specifies a certain kind of building. See below for picture.

XXXVII: Honesty

The sky is so low right now that it looks as if it is about to fall on the capital.

It darkens and large balls of storm clouds loiter up above, weighing down on everyone's heads and hearts.

Speechlessly, I walk through the lodgings of casualties.

It is true that Great Rui's martial prowess is lacking; military facilities have never been the Ministry of Works' top priority. This place is actually the best out of the defense troops stationed by the city walls but the air circulation and lighting are not particularly ideal. A strong stench of rusty blood hits my nostrils the moment I step in. The injured and ill soldiers lie parallel to each other on an unadorned *kang*¹⁹² covered by dying straw and a thin sheet, too weak to perform the rituals.

The army doctor, with his face puckered up, leads in front while I trail slowly behind, scanning every one with pale faces. Each soldier looks worse than the next. Some are ghastly white, some are waxy yellow and others are steely black. They groan with their dried, cracked lips. Some have their eyes closed but most are open, their desire to live shining through.

"Are there enough medicine?"

The doctor answers, "Some officials sent over large quantities of herbs this morning. It should not be a problem for now."

I nod and continue forward. "And how are the poisoned persons?"

He catches up after a falter. "All three thousand who were poisoned have been given medicine to induce vomiting. Other than the ones who were too serious, most of them are in recovery. The others who had shown symptoms are getting better, too."

Beneath my feet are bloodstained bandages, so dirty that I cannot even tell their original colour. In the air is a revolting smell of blood mixed with the stench of rotting muscle. I frown but don't say anything.

I'm just too familiar with this kind of smell.

After much hesitation, the doctor comes up to me and whispers, "Your Majesty, I have something to tell You."

I signal my permission but he adds, "Let us speak outside, Your Majesty."

Despite not understanding why, I walk out the building. He bows down. "Your Majesty, the water problem cannot be delayed any further. The soldiers who have been made to vomit need clean water for rehydration. There is also clean water for regular usage. This has kept me awake at night with worry."

I think back to the dried, cracked lips of those soldiers. Although Heng Ziyu had thought of a plan beforehand, we are still in a terrible situation. Canals and a reservoir have been built and the well water needs to pass inspection before entering the reservoir. Despite this, it does not meet the demand.

Everything must be done with holding against the siege as the first priority.

I look up and sigh. I might hold the ultimate power now but I can't make water appear out of thin air.

After some deliberation, I tell the official from the Ministry of Revenue, "Transport some water out from the palace for now."

He immediately rejects, "We cannot do that, Your Majesty."

"Why not?" I sigh. "The palace does not require that much water. What is wrong with giving it to the soldiers?"

When Emperor Shun built the capital city, he found two springs in the mountains, one closer to the surface and the other hidden further in. Thus, he redirected the deeper spring to the palace to use as a water supply separate from the rest of the city. It has already been found that the palace's water is not contaminated and is safe for consumption.

I'm not sure how to comment on this action of Emperor Shun's. He was very cunning and ruthless but I owe it to this that we are not backed up in a dead end.

The official bows down warily and leaves. I nod to the doctor, saying, "It will be solved shortly."

As I walk through the boisterous camp, I feel strangely light on my feet. Once upon a time, I was one of them. Things weren't so serious then. I didn't even have to think about what I had to do the next day. Now I must be responsible for everyone's future while being completely clueless about my own.

"Your Majesty," an official from the Ministry of Defense reports from behind, "we have received a message from the scouts hiding outside the city." I nod, signalling him to continue. "The rough estimate of the Yan forces is approximately one hundred and seventy thousand, however..."

"However what?" I urge.

"There have been people going in and out of the Yan camp these past several days. They look like delegates but they act strangely for one. Also, there seems to have been small disturbances amongst the soldiers."

Hearing this, I kind of get the picture.

It appears my efforts with Yongjing have finally brought about results and Master's plans are also proving useful. I thought I had to hold strong until the end of December but now that people are entering and leaving the camp, it is a sign.

December has just begun and there are signs of snowfall here. I'm afraid Yan is already five feet in snow.

Heng Ziyu showed me his aces. Lingzhou, three hundred *li* from the capital, has never been a military center so no one pays attention to it. Three hundred *li* is not far for lighthorses but these are all his assets in the north so it must be used as a last resort. It's best to not utilise them when the situation is still unclear.

I am still debating whether or not to tell him about Yongjing. Seeing that he was honest with me, I should be honest with him as well. But I'm still debating and I don't know why. Maybe I really am inherently suspicious and wary.

I'm too afraid to fully trust someone. Perhaps emperors are like this, both mistrustful and reliant on those around them, both honest and cautious.

I was born skeptical. I even have to exhaust all my resources to fend off, to fight that one person¹⁹³.

In the evening, I summon Pei Yuan who is in full armour and looking extremely alert. After asking him about the recent status of the Golden Guardians, I abruptly change the topic. "How many can be deployed?"

He looks up and takes a glance at me before bowing his head down once more. "In reply to Your Majesty, there are only twelve thousand now. There were five thousand before You ascended to the throne. It has been increasing since and now there are seven thousand main troops and five thousand back-up."

I nod a little. "How well can the five thousand fight?"

"If it's ability we are talking about, the seven thousand are undoubtedly stronger." He pauses momentarily. "There are also three thousand cavalrymen who are stronger as well."

I rest my head on my hand and lean on the arm of my seat.

The regular defense forces are already worn out and the poison ordeal didn't help the situation at all. I thought about this idea because I had no other choice.

"Hand over the seven thousand to Marshal Heng. The five thousand will take over the protection of the royal palace."

His head snaps up and he stares at me in bewilderment.

"The defenses are under pressure. The palace has been fine so far. I do not think the five thousand will have much trouble simply guarding the palace," I explain steadily. "The defense forces are fighting with their lives on the line. The Guardians should put in their fair share, too."

He replies after faltering, "I agree, Your Majesty, but the Golden Guardians are all sons of nobles, born with a silver spoon. They might hate the Yan with a burning fury but they could very well lose their lives if they were to suddenly engage with even a small number of Yan troops."

I scoff, sounding very cold. “No one can hide from their duties when the country is in danger. Are you afraid that those nobles will find you responsible?”

He bows down immediately. “I dare not.”

“If they do, tell them to come find **me**.”

I’m angry but I do not show anything on my face as I watch him get up and leave. Out of nowhere, I call out to him.

“Pei Yuan¹⁹⁴.”

He comes to a halt, his shadow elongated by the candles.

“I would like to ask you something,” I venture cautiously.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“How is,” I stutter, “Ruoming doing?”

His frame jerks once before turning still again. “Thank You for Your concern, Your Majesty. Auditor Song has been doing well in his manor.”

A sudden feeling of helplessness gushes into me. I pull a small smile but it feels so miserable.

One of my best friends was gone the moment I ordered the soldiers to drag Song Ruoming away and another one is going to leave me, too.

“I... I have many struggles too. I hope you two can understand.”

His silhouette stays unmoved. “Everything You do is correct,” he says flatly.

My lips contort into a pained smile. “You may leave.”

It’s nothing. Really, it’s nothing.

Isn’t it?

I already knew that emperors are lonely. No one would understand how helpless and painful an emperor is. They only see him sitting in that throne of his, looking down with his murderous eyes.

For some reason, I start missing Murong Yu now.

Maybe leaving that day really was a mistake?

Leaning against the *ta*, I start flipping through the war reports. Just after I read past two lines, drowsiness overwhelms me and I let my eyelids drop. In my dream, I think I see that familiar figure again, walking towards me. I can’t make out the face but I sense the anger.

I hear quiet chitchat coming from outside the hall but I don’t want to bother with it. I turn my back to it and keep sleeping.

“What?! The Yan are attacking again?” Liu An gasps out loud.

Any signs of sleep disappear. “What is the matter?” I demand loudly.

Liu An rushes in with a distressed expression. “Your Majesty, the Yan has just begun to attack the Yong Yang, An Shun, An Shang, Shang Wu, Xi Zhi and five other gates. The battle is horrifying.”

I shoot up, snapping to attention. “Why?”

He answers fearfully, “We do not know the specifics.”

Then I hear heavy boots from outside the door before it bursts open and Heng Ziyu walks in. Fully armoured and sporting a stern expression, he bows down to perform the rituals but I’m not in

the mood to think about whether he is following rules or not and I don't have enough time for him to perform them. "What is going on now, Marshal?"

He tells me with his hand on his sword hilt, "At the Hour of the Pig¹⁹⁵, the Yan troops initiated attack on Yong Yang Gate, An Shun Gate and eight other gates. Our soldiers met with them in a hurry. I have given orders for absolute defense."

"How many are they?"

"Uncertain as of now but at first glance, they are so many, I estimate that at least half of the Yan army is present."

"And how about us?"

"With ten gates under attack, our forces are stretched thin. I have moved out all of our men!"
Our gazes connect.

Just as I try to get up, he stops me. "It's best if You did not go, Your Majesty!" Then he dismisses Liu An and continues when the latter has left. "Your Majesty, should I summon the fifty thousand men in Lingzhou?"

He is so close I can see all the blood vessels crawling in his eyes, the black battle robe resting on shoulders that are modest in breadth, his hand on his sword and his eyes that look like a leopard on the hunt about to strike at any time.

Flashes of fire reach inside the hall. Murderous calls and the clashing of metal ring in my ears.

He has showed me his hand and we have been in the same boat since the beginning, so I should tell him my secret too.

I shake my head with determination. "Rest assured, Marshal. I have something to tell You."

He frowns as his lips tighten into a thin line. I nod and tell him quietly, "I believe the attack tonight is happening because they are on their last resort!"

His head snaps up and incredulity flashes in his eyes. I start explaining, leaving out trivial details, before he can question.

"The prince royal was not born to the empress and his mother died young so he does not have a strong footing in the country. The empress bore two sons. The uncle of these two legitimate¹⁹⁵ sons is the powerful right minister. The emperor is displeased with the disobedient nature of the two legitimate sons and also with the empress' clan having too much power. The left minister is a Xiao, belonging to the empress dowager's clan which is allied with the emperor's house, and strongly opposes the empress' people having too much power. He has supported the prince royal but up until now, the two sides have been evenly matched. At the beginning of the war, I sent trusted persons to infiltrate Yan. After much investigation, we have discovered that the Yan emperor is on his last breaths and rarely has a clear head. The second prince, with the help of his uncle, started to amass an army in preparation for a battle for the throne. And this morning, scouts came back reporting there has been strange personnel entering and leaving the Yan camp, so then..."

"What You mean is that the fight has begun in Yongjing."

“Yes. For all the princes, the destruction of Great Rui will not bring around direct benefits. With the emperor in critical condition, ready to return to heaven at any moment, and the tradition of battling for the throne with military power, the left minister will not be able to keep the situation under control if the fight breaks out in Yongjing. He would surely summon the prince royal back from the frontlines to fight with the other princes.”

I talk faster and faster because I don't want to think about what I have done.

“The prince royal's late mother received the emperor's love which angered the empress. The second prince, despite being the legitimate son, does not receive the same treatment from the emperor as the eldest and the two have long since grown apart. Thus, the second prince definitely does not want his brother to take down Great Rui and add another accomplishment to his belt. **I** got into contact with the second prince, who is the strongest contender, through the secret connections **I** have in Yan and made a promise to aid him in his fight for the throne. We will corner the prince royal, he from behind and **I** from the front. If he ascends the throne, **I** am willing to sever my land and hand over seven hundred *li* to Great Yan with the Rope Hill Creek as the boundary and the two countries will reach a ceasefire. In the years that **I** am alive, Great Rui will make offerings annually. At any rate, he would have too many matters to deal with within the country as a new emperor to attack Great Rui.”

I shut my mouth as soon as I finish. Heng Ziyu watches me steadily with a frown. His eyes gradually changes, becoming sharper and graver.

A deathlike silence lingers in the hall. The battle cries outside is becoming more and more distinct. The blazing red glow of fire lights up the black night sky. However, the hall remains eerily quiet.

The glaring glint in his bottomless eyes seems to slowly brighten.

“I am impressed by Your calculations, organization and execution,” he utters slowly and quietly. “But why are You telling me this now?”

“We are in the same boat so **I** thought it would be best if we were honest with each other. The fifty thousand in Lingzhou is our last resort and must be used only when necessary.”

“So if that is the case,” he nods as he says, “the prince royal should be returning to fight for the throne. And if he needs to fight with military power, he would be bringing most of his forces in order to get the upper hand.”

“The Yan regard military power highly. All of the princes have led battles but only the prince royal has received the emperor's love. He taught him well from a young age and the prince has constantly been away in battle, winning many. He has already become the enemy of the other princes. If he is to fight for the throne, he would die if he does not win so he needs to be successful.”

As I say this, my heart seems to be brutally whipped and contracts profusely.

The person who came up with a plan as wicked as this, is none other than me.

“According to the scout’s report,” I carefully enunciate each word as I gaze at him, “the emperor will not last much longer. So you must hold back the Yan’s attack tonight, no matter the cost. Even if you have to drown them in our soldiers’ blood, so be it!”

The flames of murder spark in his eyes, as fierce as a sword being unsheathed. They meet with my eyes and the fire grows. He nods sternly and takes a step back as if to leave but halts.

A complex mix of emotions swims through his gaze as his eyes linger on my face for a long time. There is determination and perhaps also a bit of something that could be called yearning. Our two pairs of eyes meet for only an instant but it seems like an eon.

I see it very well but I do not want to confirm it.

I back away quickly, “Marshal, I shall be here awaiting your victory!”

The fiery blaze shines into the hall, an ugly, bloody red. Quietly, I sit in the hall, listening to the battle cries, pondering. I extinguish the candle with my fingers.

My vision blurs and there is only me in the dark. The clamour seems to be filtered by the shadows and my surroundings fall silent. I can’t even hear a whisper. It’s so empty that it feels like the dawn of time.

For a moment, I even have the delusion that this palace is the log shed in Uncle’s house. The butler would slam the doors shut and darkness would fall upon the world around me. I sit in the dark, no candlelight, no people, nothing. With the passing of time, it is as though I have become one with the shadows.

The cold slowly reaches in with its tendrils and wraps itself around me.

I forget how old I was when I was first imprisoned in the dark for a prolonged amount of time. I thought I would go insane and kept biting my fingers to force alertness upon myself. The pain made me feel that I was alive and not devoured by the darkness and silence.

Absolute tranquility stretches out one’s nerves until it’s oh so very, very thin. Your attention would go to that one nerve that is as thin as a hair and you would wait and maybe even hope that it breaks. Even if you go insane, you would be willing as long as you could escape from the darkness.

Maybe I should be thanking Uncle?

If not for him, I would not have gotten to know the helplessness when faced with destiny and the evil ways of men.

Maybe I should be thanking the empress dowager?

If not for her, I would not have understood the reversibility of authority and the ruthlessness of power.

The memories in my mind replay like scenery passing by. Many faces flit by: the parents from my dreams, the ambivalent uncle, the arrogant cousins, the empress dowager sporting a mocking smile, the caring master—and many more—Wang Shu who carries a light fragrance about her, Song Ruoming and Pei Yuan whom I talk about everything with, Heng Ziyu who is dressed in armour...

It’s so quiet. Too quiet.

With the fatigue weighing down on me, I feel like I am about to fall asleep. The next thing I know, the entire palace disappears. Those maids and attendants, those Golden Guardians, the million civilians in the city, the hundreds of thousands of Yan soldiers outside the city and the soldiers defending the city, everything was all just a dream of mine.

There is nothing here except for endless darkness.

I really want to wake up. This dream is so long that I feel fear. I want to shout but my throat has been stuffed shut. I want to struggle but my hands and feet are ice cold and numb. The extremely long dream showed me too many people. However, they all whip past me, not a single one bothering to wake me up. They are all false. They actually don't exist in my world. There is only darkness in my world. The darkness is my prison.

I feel tears falling but my cheeks do not feel cold. My heart feels empty.

The haziness between alertness and slumber drives me crazy. I want to wake up more than I have ever wanted before. Just let me wake up. Let me wake up. I have never longed for sunlight this much in my life.

"Do you wish to wake up?"

The voice seems to come through a wispy fog and I cannot hear it clearly. I want to answer but I cannot make a sound.

I do. I do.

"I can only take one person away. Tell me, are you Han Xin or Lin Xin?"

I open my mouth. My throat tightens.

Han Xin? Or Lin Xin?

All of a sudden, I burst out of the restraints of fatigue and open my eyes as much as I can like a bug that has freed itself from the spider's web. I don't even know what I'm saying. I just mutter, "I don't want to be emperor!"

Silence ensues. The voice seems to have disappeared. I start to feel scared again and begin to scream, "I don't want to be emperor. I've had enough. Take me away!"

"Come with me." My screams are abruptly interrupted. Someone is standing in front of me. I can only see the tip of his toes. He reaches his hand out towards me as he says this.

I'm frozen out of disbelief. Slowly, I raise my head and what I see is the face that I have been thinking of all this time.

Murong Yu is wearing the armour he wore when we first met. His eyes are bright, as bright as the stars, in the obsidian darkness.

I can finally move. Cautiously, I touch his hand. It is warm and solid with the temperature of a living person. It is not shaky. It is not an illusion. As he crouches down, he flashes a smile so warm that my heart melts. The fog around us starts to dissipate and I spot the faintly glowing radiance coming from behind him that exudes warmth.

I mumble from deep in my chest, "Murong Yu."

He nods, gazing at me with his enigmatic eyes, with the affection that I'm used to.

I feel that I'm safe now. The nightmares that I fear have passed. The warmth seems to flow from his hand through my fingertips up my arm and into my heart. I do not speak and just stare intently at him. He tightens his grip on my fingers as we face each other in the darkness. It's as if a thousand words have been exchanged.

"Take me away."

Murong Yu's brows wrinkle instead. "The one I'm taking away is Han Xin. You look exactly like him. But who are you?"

I begin to experience an irrational dread. "I am him."

"You are not." The sunlight behind him starts to fade and his hand starts to shake. "You are the emperor of Great Rui. You are wearing the emperor's regalia. He could not possibly be the emperor. He is a punk who sniggers all day long."

I start quivering so much I cannot believe myself.

"I am! I am!"

He flings my hand away and stands up, backing away.

NO!

I want to scream but my throat has been frozen shut. I want to do everything I can to get up and hold his hand once more but a force is pushing down on my back, restraining me like metal pliers. The more I struggle the more I feel like my bones are shattering.

He walks farther and farther away, disappearing into the fog.

I yelp out loud, my eyes snapping open. I find that I'm still curled up in the hall.

My hands and feet are freezing cold. I can't stop shivering from being soaked with sweat. The apprehension from earlier still hasn't gone away and still lingers in my gut.

Then, I hear a deafening boom that stirs the world. It sounds like something heavy collapsing. Following that is the howl of soldiers and weapons washing up to my senses like the tide.

I spring up and run out the door.

Outside the hall, a vast spread of smoke and blazing fire shoots for the sky, dyeing the sky above the capital dark red.

Even while standing on the steps in the palace, I can feel the pounding in the earth like rolling thunder.

The Yan broke through the walls?!

I just stand there quietly until a bloodied Guardian races towards me. He kneels down on one knee. "Your Majesty, a small battalion of heavy cavalry broke through An Shang Gate and made their way through Zhen Ping Fang Gate on the west side!"

"What is the current situation?"

He reports in brief words:

An Shang Gate is weak. The Yan deployed heavy cavalry and utilised catapults and burning wood to aid the battling ram. The defense forces fought back furiously, releasing countless arrows. The heavy cavalry had the protection of their armour and succeeded in knocking down the gate.

Several hundred burst in at once. Heng Ziyu led a group of lighthorses several times in number to retaliate.

The defense forces at An Shang threw dynamites and continuously shot arrows and finally succeeded in keeping the rest of the Yan cavalry from entering. The heavy cavalry clashed with our lighthorses, their shields overlapping and the swords flashing wildly as the carnage continued. The several hundred Yan cavalymen all perished and our men sacrificed themselves, leaving few survivors.

The second round of attacks has been suppressed with much difficulty.

Only when he tells me at the end that Heng Ziyu only suffered light injuries do I let out a breath of relief.

I wave his dismissal before returning to the palace. Once I'm calm again, I nod to the man dressed in black who has been waiting patiently in front of me. He gives me the secret report on flat palms. After reading it, I am almost clear on the next steps of the Yan army. I'm just not sure as to how long tonight's attack is going to last.

They cannot stall any longer. More than half of the army is going to have to retreat and rush to Yongjing to assist their marshal in taking that throne.

Out of nowhere, I recall what Master had once said.

There is no ultimate alliance for us. We can cooperate with anyone. Our enemy in this moment could become our friend in the next.

This thin piece of paper is heavier than a ton in my hands.

The situation in Yongjing is going to be knocked out of balance. The left minister's power by itself is not enough to combat the right minister and the empress. If Murong Yu doesn't return now, he is going to lose his chance at obtaining the throne. Not just that, maybe his life, too. With every turning over of the throne, blood washes through the courts. There is only one end for those who do not obtain power.

If he doesn't want to leave, then I'll make him leave!

The candlelight sways on the desk. I make up my mind and unfurl a piece of letter paper. I take a deep breath and let my brush take over.

I'm going to tell him as the emperor of Great Rui that fighting to the death like this brings no benefit to him or me. The only people benefitting will be those watching quietly on the side.

Specifically his enemies.

Every time he invests time and resources into attacking the city, his chances of victory in Yongjing decreases.

I had promised the second prince that I would assist him in taking the throne, hand over the seven hundred *li* of land north of Rope Hill Creek to Great Yan and make offerings every year. All of this, I can promise to Murong Yu, too. My objective is simple. So long as I can save Great Rui, it does not matter whom I pledge allegiance with.

I retrieve the jade seal after writing the letter and press it down with a serious expression.

I believe he is even more aware than I am, an outsider, of what this battle between Yan royalty will entail.

I pass the letter to the Wraith who has had his head bowed this whole time. “Do you have what it takes to deliver this directly to the hands of the enemy marshal?” I inquire in a deep voice.

He flinches but does not respond.

“This letter is of utmost importance. You must deliver it even if it means losing your life!” I state with force while staring fixedly at him.

There is only one chance and it is right before me. I must give it a try no matter the risk!

He clutches the letter between his fingers while his shoulders quiver. He abruptly bows down to me before disappearing.

The premises fall silent once again and only then do I have time to go through that dream bit by bit.

Dreams are a person’s true reactions, nullifying all facades, shining light on the darkest crooks in the heart.

And *he* is a thorn stuck in there. Pulling it out would hurt but leaving it there hurts even more.

What is the most terrifying thing? Perhaps, *his* leaving will be enough to make me crumble into pieces.



In the wee hours of the morning, the Wraith returns. He is covered in blood but his expression speaks of no emotions as he hands me a letter with his head bowed. The paper has wrinkles and dried blood stains that have turned black.

Tentatively, I unfold it but its contents puzzle me so much that I cannot form words for the longest time.

It is the letter I had written, returned in its original state save for the extra lines at the end.

“The items listed concern both states and is no small matter. As this requires the utmost delicacy in its treatment, I have decided that I would like to discuss this in person with the Emperor of Great Rui so as to express the mutual sincerity for partnership.”

¹⁹² A type of bed-stove hybrid used to keep the users warm in winter. The *kang* is usually made of clay or bricks and it connected to the cooking fire in the household. This way the exhaust heat is used to warm the *kang*. For more information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kang_bed-stove

¹⁹³ This is implied in the Chinese: “the one person I love.”

¹⁹⁴ He would have called him “General Pei” if he were following formality.

¹⁹⁵ 7pm to 9pm

¹⁹⁶ There is a special title for sons born to the wife of the man, which I’ve translated as ‘legitimate.’ Murong Yu was born to a concubine so he is not given this title.

XXXVIII: *Flames*

Stepping out from the secret tunnel, a burst of cool air hits my face. The inky black sky is plastered with twinkling stars. Fires are blazing brightly on the far side of the horizon. The pleasant scent of grass wafts in the air mixed with a hint of soil.

Greedily, I take a deep breath before pulling my hood low over my face. Eidolons flank my sides closely. We have left Yi Xin Temple behind us when we spot a group of several dozen armed cavalrymen waiting ten *zhang* away.

With just one glance, I find the captain familiar. He seems to be Murong Yu's personal guard. As I draw near, he nods and I jump on a horse, following him. Cavalrymen immediately join me and ride beside me, putting some distance between me and the Eidolons.

The geography flattens as we advance. In the dark of night, the endless stretch of flatland before me is solid black. This team hasn't lit any torches either so we traverse the lightless gloom without a sound.

I feel like we are making a big detour. The wind whooshes by my ear and the grass under the horse hooves swishes. It's been a long time since I last felt the cool night breeze like this. I think I would feel even better if only I wasn't surrounded by soldiers and on the way to meet *that person*.

Light and the camp gradually come into view and I hear people conversing. The captain urges his horse forth and enters through a side entrance. I nudge my horse with my legs and catch up to him.

The captain explained to me on the way, that this is behind the front, a bit more than ten *li* away from the battle formations, and is the campsite for military logistics. The security is tight but nowhere as tight as the front where the soldiers sleep with their weapons as their pillows. Dressed in travel attire, I hide myself with the wind cloak and sneak my way in with the marshal's personal guards.

We dismount and the captain draws back a tent flap. The soldiers and Eidolons spread out behind us, still eyeing each other warily. Wordlessly, I try to enter but the captain bars my way with his arm. "No weapons allowed inside."

I chuckle, not showing surprise, and pull out the small dagger from my waist before passing it to him.

I'm already in their camp, what is the point of keeping it. I mean, if *he* really wanted to take my life, a measly dagger wouldn't be enough to stop *him*.

The tent turns out to be quite big, one made of cowhide and held up by nine poles, but the interior is actually very simple. There are only chairs, a desk and an army-style rug on the ground. The captain comes in behind me. "Make yourself comfortable, please, while I notify His Highness."

I only smile, not wanting to speak, and he backs out of the tent. After seeing the flap lowered, I take off my cloak, take a seat and pour myself some tea. I hold it between my hands that have gone numb from the night chill.

He and I exchanged letters several times during the day and finally agreed on meeting in secret at night to discuss the issues at hand. Being in the enemy's territory comes with its risks. I made Pei Yuan shut the palace gates and forbade anyone from entering or exiting. Additionally, I entrusted a secret decree to Liu An, if I do not return due to unforeseen circumstances, then the capital will be handed over to Heng Ziyu, including the throne.

He has been after it for so long. So as long he is willing to be responsible for all of the people of Great Rui and give them a good life, I will give it to him. Born a commoner, he should be able to empathise with the people more than I could.

I let out a soft sigh with my lips against the rim of the blue-and-white china¹⁹⁷. I close my eyes as the tea cools with every passing moment.

Since when does *he* take so long? If he wants to talk then just get it over with. It's unlike *him* to waste time like this.

I hear the quick thuds of boots from outside the tent and the next thing I know the shoes have stepped in. Startled, I look up—and before my eyes are those midnight, enigmatic eyes. Our eyes look right into each others, like two swords clashing, like dancing lightning bolts.

I can barely feel my own heartbeat. No emotions come to me.

Murong Yu is standing right in front of me, wearing a dark battle robe. With the light shining from the wrong angle, I can't distinguish his expression right now. The wind pushes in and lifts his clothes into the air, making him look all the more isolated.

In this moment, no language is necessary. Betrayal, deceit, country and warfare all lie before us. I don't want to explain. Whether he believes me or blames me, I still have my dignity and cannot let him look down upon me.

After quite a long period of silence, I hear my own voice saying calmly, "Why don't You take a seat, Your Highness. You do not need **me** to act as the host in Your own place, do You?"

His lips are tightly pressed in a dangerously thin line but then dance upwards a tiny bit. "Of course not. Please forgive this inadequate host, Your Majesty."

As he says this he sits down. I drop my gaze, away from that cold smile, and flash a smile of my own.

A simple utterance of 'Your Highness' and 'Your Majesty' has erected an invisible wall between us.

"I am delightfully surprised that Your Majesty would come to such a place," he remarks coolly. "How courageous of You to come here in the middle of the night while our two countries are at war."

I take a sip of tea. "I should set the example at a time of peril for **my** country."

His face is still dead and undecipherable. "You certainly have become quite noble."

"I could say the same," I comment after a moment's hesitation.

The candles dance wildly in the wind and our shadows stretch out onto the ground, engaging in a battle of their own.

I lower the cup. "I have come not for chitchat but for matters of importance." I shift to face him with raised brows. "I believe You have heard of the changes in Yongjing."

His shoulders jerk as he scoffs. "I am very impressed that You have caught wind of something happening a thousand miles away. However, I think You know much more than I do of its possible consequences."

I hum a reply. "What action are You going to take?"

He turns his head away along with his gaze. "I might be wrong but could it be that this is all thanks to You, Your Majesty?"

I sigh, overlooking the sarcasm in his words. "It is normal for You to think this way. However, I have **my** reasons, too."

Unexpectedly, he shoots up from his seat and takes several steps forward while letting out a few short laughs. "Just tell me what it is that You have planned."

My heart squeezes together as I stare at him, twinging sorely.

At the end of the day, it was I who betrayed him.

The warmth he gave me, the affection he showed me, was more than anything that I had received before I met him. Stubbornly, I left him without considering his feelings and when we met at the frontlines, I just had to be his enemy and become allies with his arch nemesis, forcing him into the spot he is in today.

I snap my head away to not think about it.

I owe him something I can never finish repaying in this lifetime.

A massive pang of guilt and regret hits me. My throat itches and my eyes moisten. His tall figure is standing in the shadows, clearly close enough to touch, but there seems to be an abyss between us. For a second there, I'd rather he turn around and get mad at me, argue with me, draw his sword out or even end my life. It would be better than showing me this lonely, pitiful picture of his backside.

He coughs quietly, his back convulsing each time, and each sound tugs my heart. "You have come all the way here, why don't You be straightforward."

My vision turns blurry and my eyes feel tender, but I grit my teeth and force back the tears. After my emotions die down, I say, "Our armies have been battling for many days but continuing to

do so brings no benefits for either of us. Surely, Your Highness wishes to inherit the dynasty. With the current agitation in Yongjing and His Majesty, the Emperor of Yan, in dire conditions, if You were to insist on a trivial victory over Great Rui, You may very well lose the opportunity. Once the mistake is made, You may never make a comeback again.” I pause for a moment. “Also, it will not be difficult if You decide to finish what You have started here after ascension. Great Rui lacks in military prowess and will not have the ability to resist Great Yan’s attacks even if we receive a temporary break. I need not say more for You to comprehend the pros and cons of this matter.”

He whisks around with his eyes shining brightly despite being shrouded by shadows.

I force myself to not look at his face as I continue, “Your Highness is a talented man with a noble goal and will definitely accomplish great deeds. As a display of my sincerity, I am willing to hand over the seven hundred *li* of land north of Rope Hill Creek on a silver platter on the day of Your ascension without You having to sacrifice a single soldier. Secondly, I am willing to make annual offerings of money, rice, tea, silk and more. Thirdly,” I falter, “I am willing to form familial bonds between our countries by marrying a royal princess¹⁹⁸ to Great Yan.”

My chest starts to sting for some reason as I say this. It’s a pain beyond anything I have ever felt.

That’s right. These proposals are typical for any request for peace. But, somehow, my emotions are going wild. Is it misery, or is it self-pity, or...?

He pulls a thin smile that covers his true expression, masking it all under that disguise of his, but his tone is freezing cold. “You¹⁹⁹ said all that just so I will retreat and you can extend out Rui’s final minutes.”

Before he finishes, he shoots forth in large strides and grabs my collar without waiting for my reaction. After I see his furious face, the energy leaks out of me.

“You bastard! Fucking bastard! You wanna bargain with me? Fine. But how dare you provoke me with something like that?!”

Murong Yu is quivering slightly and I can see the veins on his face pulsing. The candlelight falls into his eyes, appearing scarlet and unstable. His face is mere inches away from mine and I can almost feel his hot breaths, but the murderous intent of the battlefield hits my face along with it, heightening my senses.

I drop my head to hide my face while trying to hold in my painful emotion.

“I just knew it was you.” He glares at me with a crooked smile. “You said you were going to run wild to the farthest corners of this world yet you chose the highest spot in the palace.”

There is ridicule in his voice but what I feel is hurt.

I want to scream at him, that this wasn’t what I wanted, that this wasn’t my choice and that I had no way out at the time!

But I swallow those words back down before they roll off my tongue.

I want to retort but I cannot. I’m the one with the crown on his head and the regalia on his shoulders. His accusations are not without truth. I did indeed betray my initial wishes, his love for

me and his trust in me. I have the blood of the emperor in me; my parents were once the peer of the realm. The result of all that: I cannot abandon my country even in death.

In mere moments, my heart seems to wilt and freeze over.

This is the first time since ascension that I've felt such despair.

"The scouts I sent to the capital to look for you who never returned; the description of the emperor that the delegate gave me; Yuwen Yuan's suspicions; I had already felt a little uneasy but I didn't want to believe it...until I went to the frontlines myself and heard your voice from all the way over there. Do you know how I felt?"

His words stab through my ears and into my chest, peeling away all my scabs, leaving me bleeding and scurrying to find cover. I've been running for too long, hiding for too long, and now that this moment has caught up to me and exposed my wounds to the relentless sun.

"In that moment, I just wanted to drag you down from the walls and give you a good whipping! And see if you dare forget your place again!"

My heart clenches again and it burns as if I'm really getting whipped.

I have nothing to say to him and I don't know how to face him so I do the only thing I can and close my eyes.

"Open your eyes and look at me!" he barks.

He pinches my chin hard but I shake my head furiously. I don't want to open them. I don't care if it's running away.

Murong Yu, I don't know how to face you.

He releases my collar then grabs my wrist and slips an arm around my waist. The next moment I'm being yanked towards him. I don't want to be near him in my current mood so I thrash around trying to push and dislodge him.

"Let go of me, you asshole!"

"Han Xin!" he roars my name, making me come to a full stop. His grip tightens around my wrist so hard my bones seem to be cracking.

"I told you to let go! You hear me? Get away from me!"

I scream at him as I try to rip his hands away. "My name is not Han Xin. And you can't call me by my name!"

"Nothing good ever comes out from that mouth of yours so why don't we do something more productive with it?"

He leans in and catches me off guard. Shadows block out my vision and immediately after I am sucked in by a scorching, irresistible whirlpool. He pries open my lips and grinds his burning lips into my mouth like an all-out invasion, forceful and direct without a hint of hesitance.

I struggle with all my might to escape his cage-like arms that are keeping me locked within its embrace. I twist my head around with great difficulty trying to evade him but he keeps pushing forward, forcing my mouth open. His tongue slips in and gets tangled with mine, continuously stirring and licking. I'm not able to move and almost all my oxygen is being sucked away by him,

making it hard for me to stay standing. Being held by him makes me shudder and my heart pound. It hurts so much, the dull pain coming from deep within me.

This kiss nearly suffocates me.

He still doesn't want to let go of me, only parting momentarily for some air before diving back in to intertwine with me. My anger builds up and I chomp down with my teeth. The salty, sweet flavour of blood fills my mouth. He stops for a second and then catches me with his lips again, constraining my efforts to hide from him.

Not able to take it anymore, I swing a punch at him.

My fist lands on target, catching him unawares and making a muffled thud. He bends over and wobbles but still does not let go of me. I bite down again and more iron gush into my mouth. Finally, he releases me. His eyes are stormy and distinct trails of blood hang from his lips.

The next thing I know, his fist comes flying at me.

The two of us tumble to the floor, wrestling across the carpet, using fists, knees, whatever we can use without any mercy or logic, as though the other person is the archenemy. I'm hit in the abdomen and bend over in pain. Murong Yu takes the opportunity to leap forth and lies on top of me while trying to hold down my hands. I angle my knee towards his stomach. He grimaces and topples over, collapsing on me.

I stop. He stops, too. We are both breathing roughly, body against body, faces extremely close to one another.

"I'm saying this one last time, Murong Yu. Get your fucking hands off of me!"

His eyes sparkle slyly. "I'd be stupid to let a free meal pass by!"

"That's because you're the one who asked me to come!" I growl.

He sniggers. "So you just did what I told you to? Come to think of it, you sent me the letter first!" Then he shouts at me, "Still gonna deny that you're offering yourself to me?"

Raging with fury, I swing my palm out.

Slap! He doesn't hide and stares me down at me instead with his burning gaze. I'm surprised because I didn't think he would not dodge it.

Red fingerprints start showing on his face and a smile plays about his lips.

Footsteps stop outside the tent. It's the captain's voice. "Is everything all right, Your Highness?"

I freeze while he looks down at me with an ambiguous smile. "Say, what should I tell him?"

I pant, not knowing what to say. He adds steadily, "I'll let him in. I won't mind if you don't mind."

Fucking jerk. I glare at him. With me beneath him, I'm going to be the one who is humiliated.

The captain asks again. Murong Yu slowly nibbles on my ear, licking lightly while whispering, "He's my personal guard. He's gonna barge in if I don't answer."

I shudder. "Then tell him to go away."

Satisfied, he laughs and mutters in my ear, "I'll get him to go away...if you kiss me."

The captain asks a third time. Murong looks at the door then at me, perking his lips nonchalantly at me. I glance at the door worriedly and with no other choice, I lean forward, hug his neck and plant a delicate kiss on his face.

"I am fine. Return to your post."

There is no more noise from the other side of the door. I release his neck and let out a deep breath. "Okay. We're done fighting so let me up. Let's get back to business."

He doesn't budge or remove himself from me. I shoot him a dirty look and then push him. "Where were we? Mhm. Oh right. Forming familial bonds between our countries by marrying a royal princess to Great Yan."

I have just sat up straight when he shoves me back to the ground and pins me there. I'm not sure what he's trying to do and don't want to make a commotion, so all I can do is glare at him with all my efforts. I can kind of spot the seething anger on his face as he leans in until he's only mere inches away. He replies as he kisses the corners of my lips, "A marriage alliance? Sure. Let me take the emperor's hand in marriage. Don't forget the dowry. I'd be very happy."

My cheeks immediately flush with fire. I turn my head away, hissing, "You're insane." I add rudely, "Marrying the emperor? You're not worthy, Murong Yu."

He falters but bursts out laughing. "So what you mean is you'll be willing to marry²⁰⁰ me when I'm emperor?"

Marry²⁰¹ you, my ass!

I keep glaring at him as I elbow his arm away and sit up. "Come on, let's talk business. I didn't come to fight and bicker with you."

He frowns and very quickly fixes his hand on my waist while yanking off the belt around it. The next moment, his hand has sneaked past my collar and with a small pull, the clothing all fall loose to my waist. Before I can react, he presses himself down on me again.

"You!"

He laughs and then proceeds to undo his own battle robe. His arms reach out from the loose sleeves and nail my hands above my head. Both of our clothes are already loose and saggy because of the fight. His brows wrinkle and he yanks on my collar hard, tearing my clothes off.

His lips slide down along the inside of my arm to my shoulder, then my chest, and then out of nowhere he bites down hard on it. An acute pain shoots up and I can't help but arch back my head and breathe in sharply. After the pain goes away, I notice that I'm completely topless.

Murong Yu's eyes are dark with muted traces of lust. He snuggles into the dip between my neck and shoulder, lightly gnawing and licking me with a gentle smile.

"Xin, did you miss me all this time we've been apart?" he says in such a tender voice.

I shudder and pant harder. My vision quickly fogs up.

I did. How could I not?

Countless times I awoke from the nightmares, gasping for air and sweating all over. Only when I retreated into a ball in the gloomy, empty palace, closed my eyes and did my best to recall that warm, strong embrace from that night once upon a time could I fall back asleep.

He draws near and seals my lips with a slow, gentle kiss while one of his hands reaches down and starts to unfasten my pants. I yelp in alarm, “No!”

His hand doesn’t stop. I try everything I can to break free. He stops his work to open my legs and I take this chance to escape. However, he lunges for me like a hungry tiger, pressing on my stomach to get me back on the ground. He takes this chance to manoeuvre between my legs and wedge himself in there. My legs cannot close now.

“Murong Yu!”

We both have been aroused unconsciously by the wrestling earlier, our naked parts rubbing and pressing against one another, and our rough breaths. I pant for air as I feel his hands undoing my pants and touching the inside of my thighs. I’ve been abstinent for so long, there is no way I could resist this kind of temptation. To my own dismay, I’m starting to get hotter and hotter.

“I said...let go...”

“You know, I’m not scared of ripping your pants right? I’m being considerate here. How are you gonna go back with ripped pants? I’m not going to lend you any.”

I stiffen in an instant and stare in bewilderment. He smirks deviously, obviously delighted.

I’m sure someone like him would do as he says.

He shifts to one side to bite my earlobe, and then moves down my neck. “You don’t want that right? Then tell me, how many consorts did you take in and how many women did you sleep with since you became emperor?”

I answer with great difficulty while he caresses me all over, “Sleep...your ass. I have enough...to do in the day...I’d be lucky if...those old farts...let me have...some peace and quiet.”

He keeps a straight face but I spot the undisguisable contentment in his eyes. “Really? Emperors should have a whole harem and you’re telling me that you’re clean? I don’t buy that.”

I just want to scream profanities at him but I’m afraid of someone hearing us. He’s kissing my cheeks as his hands start to work faster down there. My breathing hastens but the sensations become stronger.

Before I know it, he has fully undressed me, leaving my thighs completely exposed to the slightly chilly air. His hand quickly follows suit and the heat from his palm stimulates my naked skin, a feeling of powerlessness snaking around my legs. He breathes harder and harder and plasters his chest against mine. “You want it?” he asks in my ears.

I feel like all of my blood has gone to my face. I claw at the carpet beneath me, wishing I could just slap him right across the face. I grit my teeth and spit, “You pervert!”

He stops but then starts laughing. “I remember you slept with this pervert twice though. Why didn’t you call me that back then?”

What can I say to that? A big fat jerk! That’s what he is! How come I’ve never noticed before that he’s this much of a jerk?

But before I can throw these insults at him, he holds down my waist and the next thing I know a brute force penetrates me, bringing along with it acute pain, threatening to tear me apart from the bottom up. I yell out in pain, cling onto his shoulders and bite down.

“Does it hurt?” He watches my reaction. He only rocks his hips forward a little and I’m sweating from the pain.

“No shit. I haven’t done it for so long.” I just want to take another bite out of him.

I feel as though I’m being forced open from the inside out. It’s painful and numbing; I can’t really differentiate. He seals his lips on mine and touches me all over, slowly nibbling my neck and shoulder while caressing my stomach.

I try to pull as much air in as I can and force myself to relax. I roll my hips a bit and he gasps, thrusting again, which racks me with pain again. I want to break free from his control but I feel him becoming dangerously large inside of me.

His expression is one of self-restraint, not much better off than me, but he still kisses me all over with patience, stroking my member faster and faster.

Then, after who knows how long, he starts to move tentatively. A burning sensation spreads from my groins, to my abdomen, as if to light me on fire. The repeated impact makes me straddle the line of consciousness and unconsciousness.

I arch upwards without thinking, trying to get closer to him. I really want to moan but I can only bite my own hand and hold it in with all I’ve got. Amidst the movement, I notice him frowning. Then he rams into me, making me feel tingly and also hot. My body arches up and the moans escape my lips.

“Ahhhh...uhn...mmm.”

Even in my current state, I remember that there are people outside. I close my mouth and bite down on my hand. He stops and dislodges my hand. “Why’re you doing that?”

“People...outside...”

Annoyance flashes in his eyes and his movements become bigger. My body quivers at the violent impact of pleasure. I let my head fall back from the overwhelming feeling and hang onto him with all my life as if I’m a fallen leaf in a storm, only by clinging onto him will I not lose myself.

“You fucker...can’t you...go slower?”

“You...think it’s easy...for me? I haven’t²⁰²...for so long.”

He kisses me with fierce passion and continues his attack as though to merge me into him, or break me into little pieces and stick me on him.

The sound of our nude bodies rubbing against each other, our pants and our moans fill the air. I can’t tell which are made by me and which are made by Murong Yu.

I just feel the scorching heat of our bodies fitting together and I take every one of his powerful thrusts. Every part of me feels fulfilled. We move faster and faster, and the place that connects us is so sensitive that the pain of taking him has disappeared. What is left is just the tingly, numbing pleasure rushing through my veins.

I’m on the verge of fainting as a wave of dizzying pleasure swallows me.

¹⁹⁷ A type of porcelain known for its blue patterns against a white surface.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_and_white_porcelain

¹⁹⁸ A tactic used when the enemy is too strong to defeat on the battlefield. For more information:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heqin>

¹⁹⁹ He uses the informal “you” here.

²⁰⁰ Murong Yu has only used the verb, 嫁 (*jià*), which is the action of females marrying and becoming the wife of someone, with Han Xin (the emperor) as the subject of the verb. I.e. Han Xin becoming Murong Yu’s “wife.”

²⁰¹ Here, Han Xin also uses the verb of females becoming wives. He might be expressing disdain for the use of this verb since he is a man.

²⁰² The original Chinese word means he has been completely abstinent.

XXXIX: Long Night

My vision is clear at times but blurry at others.

I'm being filled by his scorching passion, being played with almost endlessly. My back keeps rubbing against the rug while I grab tightly onto Murong Yu's arms like a drowning person.

He is still going strong, even picking up speed. I want to beg him to go slower but the moment I open my mouth, the only things that come out are stifled moans that sound like weeping. He pauses for a bit and plants kisses on my face.

My body is so hot that I can't feel anything but the numbness coming from my lower half. He's also burning. He holds me close while he starts to toy with my tongue again. Our bodies are plastered against each other as if we have melted into one.

As he grunts, I feel an explosion of broiling heat inside of me and then I start quivering, entering a zone of lightness. It's the feeling of sudden freedom and release, and of overpowering pleasure.

He falls on top of me. I take a few pants trying to control my breathing so I can handle his weight.

He chuckles softly. I wrap my arms around him and peck him on the lips.

Exhaustion kicks in and I wiggle in his embrace to find a comfortable spot to sleep. Right when I'm about to fall asleep, he pushes himself up with his arm securely around my waist and flips me over onto the ground.

Any sign of sleep disappear. I realise what is going on very quickly. I'm on all fours beneath him, arching my body, my hips sticking up in the air and legs wide open.

Embarrassed and mad, I whip my head around and glare at him. He laughs and lowers himself on my back, wrenching my jaw around to kiss me.

"Mhm..."

His hand slides past my hips, caressing and kneading. The sudden intrusion of his massive erection catches me off guard but the moans of discomfort are all being swallowed by him.

"Relax," he whispers in my ear and laughs provocatively, "It feels amazing for me but I can't move when you're this tight, can I?"

He starts to move again before he even finishes, filling me with searing pain. I groan quietly and gyrate along with him.

Despite feeling humiliated, the fire blazes within me, pushing me to the climax. I wish I could just become one with him like this and never part ever again.



I sleep very lightly in that warm, strong embrace of his, faintly feeling his body heat and his muscular arms. I grunt contently and snuggle in closer. He chuckles quietly in my ears and the next moment his embrace tightens around me.

Slowly, I blink my eyes open to look right into his obsidian ones.

Murong Yu is studying me with a smouldering gaze that contains an indescribable emotion within. There are traces of bloody lines in his eyes that hint that he has not gotten a wink of sleep. We both are stark naked right now. Being held by him doesn't feel embarrassing but rather the fuzzy, sweet feeling in my heart seems to multiply.

His chin rests gently against my forehead. His hand slowly sweeps up from my waist along the spine, caressing me with tenderness. I let out a lazy laugh and discreetly wrap my arms around him too. We just closely flank each other, as though hanging onto one another but also hugging at the same time. We share a silent smile, both too scared to disturb this beautiful moment.

Quietly, he watches me for a long time. The dim candlelight falls in his ink black eyes with only the pupils having a heated glow. My body feels as if it has been ravaged by the ocean waves, thoroughly exhausted. I don't want to budge an inch or get up.

Seeing that I've woken up, he flashes a gentle smile and tugs at the thick cloak around us, wrapping us tighter. His other arm has not left its place around me.

Quietly, I take in his temperature and scent. This is what I had longed for in all those nights when I awoke from fright and all those moments when I was soaked in blood.

The entire world has retreated faraway. The menacing blades, the pungent blood, everything, has been isolated from this space. Here, there is only this snug, peaceful embrace and I actually have some peace of mind that I haven't had the pleasure of having.

He breathes steadily by my ear, warm air hitting my face—it's a bit itchy. I look up at him, without a sound, looking straight at the face that I had only been able to see in dreams. I think he lost some weight. His face is even more chiselled than before, even more handsome and sharp. The arches above his eyes are lax and a playful smile dances about his lips.

It's a weird feeling. I mean, shouldn't we be clashing at sword's point, battling to the death right now? Or at the very least, wrestling and howling at each other to rip the other person into pieces.

My thoughts wash over me like the tide. He brushes my face with his, both of us slightly burning. I feel miserable and sweet at the same time. I want to say something but give up right away. This peace is just too hard to come by.

After a really long time, he finally breaks the silence. “Say, Xin, how nice would it be if the sun didn’t rise.”

“Yeah,” I murmur. “How nice would that be...”

However...

We’ve fought and we’ve done it. It’s time to talk business. I can’t stall any longer and neither can he.

I start after much hesitation, “So, are you gonna retreat?”

Straightforward and abrupt, it’s not the tone fit for a peace alliance but I do not need to be shy with him. He probably already guessed what my coming here means.

Expectedly, his lips curve upwards sarcastically. “What choice do I have when you’ve already planned everything out for me?”

I glumly turn my gaze away to the candle off to the far side.

He loosens his arms a little. “Let me ask you something and give me an honest answer.”

“Shoot.”

“Did you have any other plans coming here to the enemy camp? Or are you telling me you really had no fear? You were that certain that I wouldn’t take you down and initiate a full-on invasion with you as hostage?”

“Yes,” I sigh. “You’re right. I definitely hesitated when I got your reply. But I couldn’t linger on it. I could only take the risk. Plus,” I pause and continue at a lower volume, “I haven’t seen you for so long... I just...”

I shake my head, unwilling to continue, and he just tightens his embrace and leaves it unsaid.

“You just love to do as you please. Think about it. Who else is there to keep the country in check without you in the city? Who else is there to fight back against me?”

I shake my head. “I came and I came prepared.”

He pulls an unconvinced expression after faltering for a moment. “Yeah, right, if you didn’t unite the court and strengthen the defenses in the shortest amount of time possible, Rui would already be destroyed beyond hopes of repair.”

Then he sighs lightly, I’m not sure with what kind of emotion. “Even if you came prepared, as long as I let them see you in front of both sides, in front of the all the soldiers—what would your soldiers think, what would your citizens think then? Your army would shatter into pieces so easily I won’t even need to deploy my men.”

“You wouldn’t.” I stare at the top of the tent.

He stiffens with surprise and only lets out a “huh” after a long pause. He props himself up and looks down at me with playful eyes. “How are you so sure? Enlighten me.”

“Because I believe so. Back when we were still north of South Hill Pass, you were kind enough to give a lord of Great Rui a proper burial and allow the prisoners of war to keep wake for him, so how could you do such a low thing?”

He scoffs. “Still wet behind the ears.”

Murong Yu brushes aside the stray hairs in front of my eyes and runs his fingers down, holding a strand up to his nose. “Water is likely the most important issue in the Rui capital now. What’s stopping me from doing worse things if I could easily poison your water?” He shakes his head. “That man was already dead so he posed no threat to me. He was a lord nonetheless, if treating his remains with dignity is easy to do and gives me a good name too, then why not?”

He leans in, reaching around my neck and softly rubbing it with his icy cold fingers. “If you died—died under my sword—I would let you have a proper end as well.”

His fingertips are so cold that it scares me, the broiling heat from earlier nowhere to be found. A violent shiver runs through me and his fingers halt, as if they’ve felt my aura of fear.

A few strands of his hair hang down, sweeping against my face. I look into the eyes that still held bits of lust within them. “But how could I just let you do as you please and let you direct me? The only way you’ll be able to, is if I died here.”

His fingertips continue sliding down to my Adam’s apple. “You’re wrong, oh, so very wrong.”

Murong Yu’s bottomless eyes draw closer. “What I want is the emperor and I can accomplish the same thing even if he’s dead. The people in the capital don’t care about you. They care about your status. It wouldn’t bother them whether you were dead or alive. As long as they know that I have the emperor of Great Rui in my hands, I doubt anyone dare defy me.”

He says this in a tone so flat it is as calm as backwater. I feel a bitter emotion exuding within me and I can’t think of anything in reply.

Every single word he utters is so distinct it seems to stab into my heart like knives.

I am the emperor. I am no longer me.

Once again, he has picked open my dried scabs with his sharp words, leaving me dripping with blood.

Seeing that I turned away, he reaches for my face and twists it back around to face him.

“It’s more lonely now that you’re the emperor, right? You were always by yourself then and now you don’t even have someone to pour your heart out to. I couldn’t even believe my eyes when I first saw you. It was just like a pile of clothes lying there with no one wearing it.”

His other hand ventures down along my waist, tenderly caressing. “Here, too, it’s gotten so skinny.”

My vision blurs again from this one utterance.

“Silly you, keeping everything inside and not letting anyone help you.”

“Aren’t you the same?”

In his embrace, I seem to have gone back to that night once more. For as long as I can remember, I had never cried so pathetically in front of outsiders—no, not even in front of my so-

called family and friends. Yet when I'm lying in this man's arms, his mere existence can let me have some peace of mind.

"There, there. Now you're crying again. Keep it down or someone might come in." His voice starts becoming shaky, too, as he wipes away the tears brimming in my eyes.

I nod and take a deep breath. "I admit, everything you said is true. But even if you can take down the capital, taking care of the aftermath and the many matters after the surrender will take much time, effort and resources. How will you manage to do that?"

His brows point upwards, changing his expression into a fierce one. "You should know since you took the throne the extreme measures a powerful person must take. I've heard a thing or two about what you've done: a massacre in the courts, shooting down refugees. The same goes for me. There is only the question 'should I' and 'need I,' not 'dare I' or 'can I.' My father has taught me since I was young that one can never be too generous with bloodshed and mercilessness if he wants to reach that almighty position at the top. The blood of the innocent had christened my blade when I was eight. You think I would be afraid of slaughter now?"

He takes a short pause before spitting out with venom, "You want to know how I'm going to tame Great Rui? I'll tell you how. The day the walls fall and the city surrenders, I will kill every male over the age of fifteen who has the ability to fight back. I won't spare a single one. I'll butcher them all. Let's see you oppose me then!"

I glare at him with a cold look. I know he speaks the truth and I have nothing to counter it.

"The three conditions you proposed, I will accept the first two. Forget about the last one. A princess..." He then shakes his head while sighing very faintly. "So what...couldn't possibly stall my advances..."

"In the end, we are still on opposing sides." He touches his chin to my cheeks. The short stubble pokes me, stinging a little.

Seeing that face of his, I can't help myself from reaching out and touching it. He freezes for a moment before cracking a smile. My fingertips come into contact with his awfully cold skin. Right when I'm about to pull back, he takes hold of my hand and won't let go.

Our lips brush lightly against one another before springing apart.

"It's getting late. I should get going." After the mental battles, and even if I'm reluctant to leave this warmth, I haven't forgotten what I have come for.

He stays quiet for a while before his hand that is on my hand quivers and releases me. Murong Yu sits up without saying a word, removing the cloak and exposing us to the icy air. I shudder and push myself up from the ground.

He picks up something and slips it on. "Go. It's already the Hour of the Tiger²⁰³."

The rug is strewn with clothes—cloaks, shirts, underwear—some of which are torn and balled up, like the place has been looted.

I pick up my own undergarments, shooting dirty looks at him while I put each of them on. I shake out another piece of clothing and something white tumbles out. Alarmed, I rush to retrieve it

but he suddenly darts forward, bends over and picks it up first, holding it up close to examine it. Then he beams at me before approaching and putting it around my neck.

I smile back and don't say anything.

I remember my own pendant. If only I had it with me now, I could give it to him, but...

Sitting on a chair, Murong Yu pours himself a cup of tea and watches me casually with a bit of mischief in his eyes. He even pushes me, "If you're gonna get dressed, you should hurry it up."

I grind my teeth in anger so hard that I can hear it. Screw this. I start pulling everything over my head. Meanwhile, I can still feel his eyes on me even though I'm facing the other way. I tug with annoyance at the pieces of fabric and protest, "Couldn't you have gone slower? I mean I don't think these are gonna last through the trip back!"

He remarks as though I said nothing, "Why are you hiding? Not like I haven't already seen everything."

This guy can be even more frustrating to deal with than me when he wants to!

When I finally finish getting dressed and combing my hair, I walk up to the table and take out a stack of letters and a half-moon shaped pass from my sleeve. He shows a puzzled face. I explain, "You can take all of these if you want. These are the letters I exchanged with the second prince. I believe they can be of use. This is the pass of the Wraiths which you can use to command the forces in Yan."

His expression darkens and he stays silent, several emotions playing across his face.

"You really think I'd pull my troops back?"

I let out a deep breath. "That's your choice and this is mine. There's no conflict."

He stares at me dumbly in disbelief towards what I just said.

"The throne is the most important thing for you," I utter calmly.

Before he replies, I pick up the cloak from the door and swing it around myself. I pull the collar in together, hiding my body. I take a good look at him before turning to the tent entrance.

"Xin."

My feet halt abruptly but I don't turn to look. "What else is the matter, Your Highness?" I inquire flatly.

The footsteps behind me sound muffled. I think he is coming in large strides. The next thing I know, I've fallen into that familiar embrace once again. He snakes his arms around my waist and leans in, placing his lips on my cheek.

"Why must you be like this?"

I turn my head back a little, feeling his hot lips, but I don't say anything.

"You... You really are inconsiderate and reckless as always, always causing trouble but never cleaning up after yourself. You've used my little brother and now you're tossing him away without a care in the world, leaving this big brother of his to clean up the mess."

"Isn't that perfect for you?"

"Still, you don't have to give me the secret messages. It'd be better for Great Rui if I have a harder time. You don't have to help me."

I pull a light smile. "I owe you, but even so, I owe more than I can ever return."

He shakes and his arms tighten around me. "You yourself are mine. What's there to owe?"

I smile as tears well up in my eyes. I force them back and just stay there. If only I could be in his arms until the end of time.

For a long, long time, there is only our exhaling and inhaling.

I pat the back of his hand. "Really gotta go now."

"To do what?"

"I have to take a bath and take a short nap if there's time. Then I'll probably get woken up. The day has just started."

He turns me around to face him. I don't fight back. He leans down and seals his lips on mine, shakily invading my mouth—so cold, so tender, without any lust, it is just a motion of mutual comfort; desperate, heated and lingering.

It's so familiar that I yearn for it; I yearn for it so much that I'm succumbing to it.

I grit my teeth and back away. Tears fall down my face and in between my lips.

He takes a step forward, his arms still in the same hugging position, gazing at me.

I whisk around, too scared to see him. I wipe the tears away and walk towards the entrance. I raise the flap and then stop in place, not turning my head back. "Could Your Highness please pass a few words on to Duchess Xiao for **me** if You happen to see her."

Without waiting for his reply, I say calmly, "Please let her know, her *xiao* is still with **me**. **I** shall gift her a new one if there is a chance. Also, **I** thank her very much."

Outside the tent is still the murky night. The Eidolons and soldiers are standing guard a ways off. The captain comes over and holds the tent flap open for me. I walk out in strides and jump on the horse. The captain lets the flap down and joins me on his horse. The entire party silently leaves from the side entrance like how it came before.

My body is aching but the injuries in my heart are worse. Using the hood of the cloak to hide my face, I let the tears flow free.

Footsteps echo in the long, pitch black tunnel. I'm sore and tender all over and my legs feel weak. Suddenly, I trip and manage to stay standing by holding onto the wall. The Eidolon behind me shoots forth to help me but I shake my head, catching my breath myself.

That bastard never knows where the line is. I'll excuse him for fighting that way, but he has sex the same way too. My vision goes blurry and I feel like I can fall asleep right on the spot. Nothing is better than some sleep now. Nothing is softer than a pillow.

No. I'm still sticky. The first thing I have to do when I get back is take a nice bath and deal with those obvious marks, the wounds from the fight and the purplish-bluish stuff from his bites... The wound on the corner of my lips starts stinging.

The first thing I see when I come out of the tunnel is Liu An curled up in a ball with his head tucked in. I think our footsteps have woken him up and he climbs to his feet. "Welcome back, Your Majesty."

I nod weakly. The soreness is beginning to bother me. He trails behind me with his back bent as we walk out Qing Feng Chamber. “Your Majesty, the battle appeared to have died down in the evening. You ordered the palace to be in lockdown so we denied Marshal Heng entry several times, I am afraid...”

“Go ahead and make preparations. I wish to bathe,” I command, ignoring what he says.



The steam rises into the air, clouding my view of the exquisite decor.

Only after soaking in the hot water with the cool, white marble against my back does my body relax a little. The tense feeling suddenly goes away and the soreness and fatigue becomes more apparent with the heat coming from the bathwater. The unbearable pain that accompanied every step I took has totally disappeared but sensation starts to rush back into the numb lower half of my body with the help of the water. Frequent but not strong, tingly waves of sensation make me shudder with every movement.

Cupping the unclouded water with my hands to clean myself, I notice that my chest and shoulders are teeming with hickeys, the bluish and purplish colour appearing all the more obvious. Unknowingly, I rub my neck and then laugh helplessly. I know even without looking in a mirror that this place is probably dark red like I got bitten by a dog.

Soaking in the water makes me really drowsy. I close my eyes, ready to fall asleep in this steamy room.

“Your garments have been gathered, Your Majesty,” a woman says shakily after a while. I blink open my eyes, coming out of my daze, and see a few women holding some clothing on their arms on the other side of the thin veils, their heads bowed low on the far side of the tub.

Although I know they won’t look around recklessly, I press myself lower into the water, letting the liquid wash over me. They put down the clothing and leave after performing the rituals.

I bathe for a little bit longer before getting up. I grab a loose bath robe and slip it on. Only when I see the mirror before me do I discover I really haven’t taken a good look at myself for a long time.

The eyes are still my eyes but something about it has changed.

The same ink black eyes have been shrouded with fog and are no longer pellucid.

I draw near and then I notice after taking a closer look that my face looks bruised, the corner of my lips are torn and there are still bloody scabs on them that seem to be from the fight. Then I touch my neck and there is a ring of maroon that stretches all around it. No collar would be tall enough to cover it.

Shit. Going out like this would definitely...

I’m shaking with fury. That fucking bastard!!

“Son of a bitch. I’m going to kill him one of these days,” I spit venomously. Out of nowhere, I hear something knocking against the ground. I whip my head back to see Liu An kneeling there with quivering shoulders.

I quickly fix my expression to appear stern and dignified. “What is it?”

“Marshal Heng has forced his way into the palace, saying he wants to see You, Your Majesty, and no one could stop him.”

I put the palace under lockdown before I left in the evening with the excuse that I was not feeling well, not permitting anyone to enter, including Heng Ziyu. It’s not surprising that he grew suspicious after such a long time, but to be this heedless and barging in...

Footsteps are heading for me. Alarmed, I put on an outer robe without even taking off the bathrobe. Liu An rush over to help me and just when we have pulled the collar up in an attempt to hide the marks on my neck, the doors swing open.

Heng Ziyu is standing outside the door with a flinty stare. Behind him a poor attendant is cowering behind the door. I cough and pretend to look up carelessly. “Marshal?”

He steps over the doorstep and bows slightly. “I beg Your forgiveness for it is difficult to perform the rituals while in armour.”

I’m starting to feel uncomfortable from his intense look. This isn’t because I am self-conscious but because even this reasonable excuse seems to be a bit out of place.

“Please rise, Marshal.”

He does as he is told and stands before me, his eyes still bright. “How are You feeling?” I nod and stop his inquiries with a wave of a hand. “Fine after some sleep. Give **me** the report on the war.”

He puts his hands behind his back and briefs me on the situation after a short pause. The Yan’s attacks were unusually fierce after night fall and they took control of the area around An Shang Gate again. However, our troops managed to hold strong with the height and protection of the walls. It is almost dawn now and the attacks are sparse.

I let out a sigh of relief after the last bit. “That is good to hear.”

I shift over to get a cup of tea. I turn back as I sip the tea and clash into his gaze which causes me to stop dead in my tracks.

His eyes have stopped on my neck, filled with astonishment. In this room with dim candlelights, all I can see is the astonishment.

Slowly, Heng Ziyu looks up to my face, the flinty spark in his eyes gone, leaving only hints of depression. I realise with a start—I let go of the collar of the robe earlier when I grabbed the tea cup. The wounds on my face and the marks around my neck must all lay exposed to him right now.

I start feeling self-conscious now. No matter how dark the hall is, there is no way he cannot see when he is this close to me. And a man his age would certainly know what kind of marks these are.

This feels as embarrassing as being caught cheating.

I lower my gaze only to feel more embarrassed. There was so little time I didn't have enough time to even tie the belt. The wet bath robe inside is completely showing and stuck to my skin. The silk robe becomes wet easily and is almost see-through as it sticks to me.

My heart is pounding. I clutch the cup in my hand, not knowing where to put my eyes. His towering figure is like a wall, blocking me without moving at all.

I look down and notice that his arm has been roughly bandaged. I suppose he got hurt.

"You're injured, Marshal?" I try to keep my voice flat but I find that my heart is beating even faster and my ears are ringing so loud that I don't even know if he answered me or not.

Cold air hits my shoulders and I realise one side of the robe has slid off my shoulder.

Alarmed, I try to shrink back but I find that he is holding down my shoulder like a metal strap. In the moments of my bewilderment, he snatches the cup and throws it on the ground. The ugly shattering sound brings me back to present and I wrap the robe around me in a hurry. He regards me with a cold look as he snatches my wrist and touches my neck with the cold fingertips of his other hand.

"Could You tell me what this is?"

My stomach jumps nervously and I can't form any words. He leans in close and raises his voice. Pulling his arm to the side, he tears down the other collar.

"You're going to have to forgive me if You do not tell me!"

So embarrassed that I'm angry, I bark at him, "It's none of your business!"

He stops and glares at me with eyes like a blade. I gasp and return the look. "Who are you to stick your nose into **my** business?"

He watches me steadily without further movement, his emotions indecipherable. No more words, no more movement, save for his slightly trembling hand that is holding my wrist.

I grit my teeth and fling his hand away, drawing back speedily. His fingertips scrape across my neck, making me shiver. His burning eyes linger on me, surprisingly appearing glum.

I don't want to look at him anymore and I drag my robe back into place. "It will be dawn soon. If Marshal Heng wishes to speak about matters with **me**, **I** ask that you wait momentarily outside the hall."

"Your Majesty," he finally starts talking after a long silence. "You seemed to have been...since yesterday evening. Did You leave the palace?"

This stops my hands from tidying myself.

"Why must You be like this?" he asks quietly while holding eye contact.

The flames in his eyes start to flicker and just when it appears to almost burst out, he sweeps his arm out and whisks me into his embrace. He snatches my hand again and presses it to his chest. His freezing, metal armour makes me shiver.

The rusty smell of blood is so chilling but his tone of voice is so gentle I feel my heart clenching.

"Why must you... Don't you trust me?"

I look at him dumbly. My mind is in a mess. I have no idea why he has said that all of a sudden.

The next thing I know, he tilts my face up and kisses me—breaching my lips with the cold of the night and a tinge of bloodshed.

Within the darkness in his eyes, flames seem to have been lit once again.

My senses come back to me and I shove him away, stepping back while catching my breath.


He looks confused while I point at the door, shaking and trembling, even my voice. “Out! Get out!”

Heng Ziyu keeps scrutinizing me and when he finally turns around, he leaves without looking back. As I watch him leave, I collapse on the *ta* with a tightly uncomfortable throat.

On the other hand, the sky outside the palace gradually starts to lighten. The morning rays seep in and drive away the darkness within.

²⁰³ 3am to 5am.

XL: Morning

t dawn, I go to An Shang Gate to inspect the situation, ignoring all attempts to stop me.

Corpses have formed piles on the walls. The bodies of Yan and Rui soldiers lie quietly side by side like comrades in death. The limestone battlements are coated with sprays of blood that are still sticky. I accidentally get some of the warm goo on my hand and I get the sensation that the rest of me is sticky as well.

The sky brightens but the sun is hiding amongst the clouds, as though unwilling to witness this carnage.

With my collar flipped up and a helmet on my head covering the insanity from last night, I look just like a responsible, empathetic emperor.

There are people moving the corpses wearing scraps of armour whose faces cannot be seen through the blood and dirt. Some bodies stick out crookedly on the side of the battlements, their blood dripping down along the wall, painting terrifying lines of crimson. It adds a ghastly spread of colour to the ashy walls.

The war smoke eddies and the metal hooves beat chaotically. The sea of black is shrinking back, edging back one wave at a time and leaving behind it innumerable corpses. The black flags are still billowing in the air like ripples of ink.

I'm standing on the wall with a complicated feeling.

Every bloodbath, no matter which side wins, always leaves mountains of bones lying on the battlefield.

I don't understand why every ruler of Great Yan always craves battle and ignites warfare with other countries. And I also do not know whether it was right or wrong of me to show my hand to Murong Yu last night.

Like I said:

That was my choice and his choice isn't something I can predict.

He could choose not to retreat nonetheless and I don't think I have what it takes to withstand the next brutal attack.

I'm no longer organizing a resistance but rather making a bet with no way out—the stakes are Murong Yu's current situation and also his feelings towards me.

I let my eyelids drop. I can't help but sigh when I see the ever-changing floating clouds in the distance, casting heavy shadows on the ground.

I turn and see Heng Ziyu coming towards me with a few armed men behind him. For a while, we don't say anything.

I face another direction and ask flatly, "How many deaths last night?"

"In reply to Your Majesty," his voice is just as still. "An Shang Gate had the highest number, around three thousand. The rest of the gates suffered around one thousand each, altogether more than ten thousand."

"And the Yan?"

"Including the bodies outside the city, more than us."

I nod as I stare at the black ocean just a ways off.

He looks at me with a frown and then dismisses his generals with a wave of a hand.

"You should be resting in the morning, Your Majesty." He hasn't drawn near and his tone is still light. I pull a thin smile, not wanting to say anything.

Last night and this morning, it was all personal. He has no right to be involved and no right to inquire. I need him to understand this. It doesn't matter if I am willing to give him the throne—and even if I am—he is still my subject before that happens and I his ruler. The lower cannot disrespect the higher. This is the custom between the ruler and his subjects.

"The Yan have pulled back as of now but the next attack could happen anytime. I hope You will take charge of the army and tighten defenses. We must not be careless," I do not look back at him as I say this.

He stays quiet for a long time before answering, "Yes, Your Majesty."

I spot him out of the corner of my eye looking in my direction. "What are You looking at, Marshal?" I say with the same old smile. "Is there something on **my** face?"

No replies come.

The sun rises amongst the clouds after much hesitation and illuminates the lands.

I turn to leave and then he starts, "Your Majesty."

I stop but do not look back. "What else is the matter, Marshal?"

"Now that the Yan forces have backed away temporarily," he asks quietly. "I am curious what Your plans are regarding Yongjing."

I let out a chuckle. "I have plans of **my** own, naturally. All You need to do is strengthen the capital's defenses."

He takes a few steps towards me and his voice sounds extremely close. "Will the Yan really retreat?"

I return to the composed tone I had before. "I am not the Yan's marshal."

I walk down the walls and the soldiers quietly and neatly part to either side, heads held high and eyes looking straight ahead. I've moved some ways when I spot several soldiers passing by

carrying cots woven from hemp and farther off I see a pile of corpses and the soldiers pouring oil on it. Beside them are blazing torches.

I ask the second lieutenant beside me, “Are all the bodies being burned?”

A sorrowful expression flashes on his face. “In reply to Your Majesty, yes. According to tradition, all those who gave up their lives in war are burned and their ashes are gathered and disposed of.”

“I have heard, though, that some have not yet been burned.”

“Yes.” He bows. “There are too many casualties. Half of the army is wounded soldiers. We can barely take care of the live ones, let alone the dead. There are medicine and doctors but a lot of people can’t see the doctor in time.”

He points to the crowd on the other side. “The soldiers over there are all young. They died the night before the last and only now are they being...”

My lips flatten into a line. “Failing to burn the bodies in time is a violation of the army code,” I warn in a low growl. “All personnel in charge of this will be punished by ten hits of the stick. Go and burn them now, and receive your punishment later.”

Then, before I even take two steps, I hear his miserable voice again. “Your Majesty, those soldiers were from the South. The custom there isn’t cremation so their countrymen couldn’t bear to. So...”

I stay in the spot for a moment before saying, “I heard that people from the South are buried with their feet pointing in the direction of their home when they are in unfamiliar lands. That way the deceased will be able to see the way home when they sit up. So... So pass on the word for the soldiers to make sure their feet are pointing south when they light it on fire.”

The second lieutenant stiffens but quickly bows down. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

I almost didn’t catch it.

Cremation isn’t the tradition and it’s not common, but there is no other way. With the city completely surrounded, the bodies could not be buried and have been accumulating. It could very well trigger a disease. Drinking water is already insufficient; there cannot be any more problems.

There are too many who have lost their lives or the ability to return home because of this battle. Those who step onto the battlefield should already know that they may come back wrapped in white and those who rule up high should not be soft. However, I am human after all. I do feel depressed when I see living human beings fall and turn to ashes before my eyes.

They have people thinking about them back home, which they will never again return to.



The Yan forces left the city but made camp at Wu Hui Station²⁰⁴ about ten *li* away. Five thousand advanced cavalymen stand in their grand formation in front of the camp as usual. Reports come

into the capital one after another; the guard soldiers still take shifts patrolling along the walls. The city is deathly quiet aside from the suffocating smoke and thundering horse hooves.

When night falls, the soldiers stand guard silently in the shadows with spears in hand. Every ten steps' distance a torch lights up the walls, sketching thin and disturbing lines.

No more killing. No more bloodshed.

It's quiet, so quiet that it's frightening, like the prelude of a storm.

I'm waiting—waiting for Murong Yu to make the ultimate decision. Whatever he chooses, I cannot object.

He actually understands as well as I do, that we are no longer the original us. The burden that he and I carry upon ourselves is too much. We are the same, able to overlook trivial matters but also be clear-headed when it comes to significant ones. We know what is okay and what isn't. We are always able to remain calm and rational during critical times.

I've already made my choice, yet he is still keeping his silence.

In his and in my hands, lie too many people's lives. With a turn of a hand, we can cause a hurricane and they will die before we can even know of their existence. Even if we fulfill our responsibilities, their families would always hate us.

Since the moment I decided to fight, I've used everything I could and killed so many. By purging the court, cleansing the palace, murdering refugees, I've stained my hands with innocent blood. I don't expect anything from future historians—cruel, bloodthirsty or violent, it doesn't matter—because they would never understand what I have to give up when I make the choices I do.

I don't know how I will be looked at after death but I can't be concerned because I am the emperor as of this moment. I am carrying the fate of this country and all its citizens on my shoulders.



Time slips past in the tranquility. Two days have passed since that night. Today is the third day.

The icy moonlight shines through the window and onto the tiles.

I take out Ding Guang from its rack, run my fingers along its sheath and remove it solemnly. As soon as it escapes its confines, a faint glow exudes into the room. I carefully polish it with a silk cloth and the aura of death is released. For a moment, it's as if I have returned to the desert and open skies, where the yellow sands stretched for miles upon miles in the frontiers.

Just how much nameless sorrow and joy, life and death, war and blood is engraved into this blade?

My hand falters and a skinny line of blood appears, and then a drop of warm liquid falls down. The scarlet bead of blood against the glistening blade looks like an ominous sign.

I pour some wine onto it and watch the amber fluid slide down and dilute the scarlet, washing the metal with a ghost of colour.

Murong Yu, if you insist on taking the capital, the only thing I can do if it comes down to it is drawing my sword and dying along with the city.

"If you died—died under my sword—I would let you have a proper end as well."

But I don't need you to give me a proper end. I shall protect my dignity as an emperor with this sword.

Scrutinizing Ding Guang, I do not sleep for the whole night.

Liu An comes in at daybreak, reminding quietly, "Marshal Heng is outside awaiting Your summons according to Your orders."

"Summon him."

Heng Ziyu is in full armour, kneeling below with a stern face.

We haven't met in private since our conflict the other night. When we do meet, others are always present and I speak to him in a flat tone. I need him to understand that I am his ruler and he cannot disobey me for the time being.

"I would like to say a few things, Marshal."

"Please, Your Majesty."

"Give the order to the lighthorses in Lingzhou immediately, they are to retreat southward in the most discreet fashion possible and stop north of the Qihe River."

His shoulders jerk, as if he was about to lift his head up. "If I may ask, what is the meaning of this?"

I tap on a tea cup lightly. "I will get them to immediately relocate the capital if the capital cannot be secured and set up defense with the Qihe as protection. Lord Jin Xiu will also rendezvous there and provide assistance."

His head whips up and shock flashes across his face. "Your Majesty?"

"Prince Lie does not seem to have any intention of retreating despite the disturbance in Yongjing." I pull a smile and it pulls on my heart. "He insists on taking down the capital but he must also return home. This way, even if the capital falls, the South would not be affected and the fifty thousand in Lingzhou would not have to become a needless sacrifice."

"Perhaps You are being too pessimistic?" he remarks after a pause.

"We must strive for the best but prepare for the worst."

He lowers his head. No emotions play on his face. His lips are pressed tightly in a line and his eyes are casted on the ground, as if to stare a hole into the tile. I watch him in silence and he kneels there, motionless.

Then he speaks, "Even if the city falls, I shall make sure that Your Majesty arrives in the South, even if it means losing my life."

I scrutinize him, trying to decipher from his eyes the validity of his words.

If I died here, he could escape and when he returns to the South, he would still be the ultimate authority with his operations there. And without my control, he can take all the power and the place of the Eldest.

“There is no need!” I reject. “We have been resisting for such a long time that if the city falls, the Yan would certainly not have mercy in their wrath. What would become of **me** if **I** abandoned the people and lived on pathetically? How would **I** face the world? The captain must go down with his ship!”

“But Your Majesty!” He blurts sharply, his voice echoing in the building. “You are the basis of the state and what the people depend upon. You cannot make such plans!”

I lift the cup and take a sip of tea. Not getting a response from me, he looks up and stares at me with an intent gaze. And when I keep my silence, the glow in his eyes die down. “Your Majesty... You still don’t trust me?” He asks bitterly.

A heavy wave of misery rushes over me, pressing down on me.

I know he’s loyal and just, I know he’s passionate and hot-blooded, I know he cares for the people’s welfare and I know he despises corruption and war. I think if not for our identities and statuses, we probably could have become the best of friends, the most loyal of companions—could have.

I’m inherently suspicious and wary. I doubt not only him but everyone.

Really, he shouldn’t be so sad. The one who should feel sad is me.

I bear with the pain and order flatly, “Do not waste time.”

He’s still looking at me, not moving or speaking. Our eyes stay connected in silence.

Suddenly, a loud commotion starts outside as if coming down from the skies. Then I hear hurried footsteps rushing by like thunder. It sounds like many people sprinting and shouting.

“Hurry!”

“Your Majesty!”

“The Yan army!”

I look up at the entrance and my heart pounds. The noise is so sudden it hit me right in the chest. It couldn’t possibly be...

The doors of the palace are shoved open. Liu An enters, gasping for air, with a joyful expression. “Your Majesty... the report... said... the Ya-the Yan retreated!”

When he finishes, deafening roars are heard from the Golden Guardians outside the hall.

I shoot up and take the report amidst the exhilaration. I skim over it quickly and I feel my nose stinging. Heng Ziyu is looking at me with a calm expression but his eyes speak of glee.

“Excellent. Prepare the carriage. **I** am to go to the walls.” I nod with a smile while trying to control the delight so that my voice is steady.

The carriage and the accompanying guards traverse the city that looks as usual. The civilians stay in their homes and only the patrols roam the streets, enshrouding the capital with a heavy air.

The soldiers standing guard on the walls are as always, armed and silent, on full alert as though facing their mortal enemies. I take a good look out to the distance, all that is left is the never-ending

plains and the turbid tranquility bobbing lazily above, the five thousand cavalry stationed there nowhere to be found. The land is so quiet that the massacre in the past two months and the invasions before that were mere nightmares.

And now, the nightmares have finally come to an end.



In the latter half of December, Sixth Year of Nan Jing, the Yan army left the capital of Great Rui. The marshal of the army, Prince Lie, led eighty thousand lighthorses back first while the rest retreated slowly in the heavy snowfall.



Creaaaaak.

The solid steel gates swing open. A swarm of cavalymen surge out, the hooves of their horses pound heavily on the earth.

I have on a silver suit of armour and a black robe while Heng Ziyu is wearing a black helmet with a white feather. The two of us race on horseback through the path cleared by the soldiers and out the city gates.

The sky is a hue of greyish blue and hangs extremely low as if it is going to fall any moment. Tiny snowflakes flutter down, tickling and freezing my bare skin taut along with the brisk winds blowing across the plains.

Casting my gaze about, all I see are corpses. They overlap over one another, their faces no longer recognizable. Blanketed with a light layer of snow, they look like white mounds of dirt. Their blood has dripped dry and has been sucked up by the crimson, frozen ground below.

The well-trained steeds stand still away from the piles of bodies.

A rich stench of rotting flesh still exudes from the battlefield. Broken plates and mail lie scattered about. Ghastly, white bones are showing through the degrading bodies. The death toll is too high to imagine. Their spears are stuck in the earth, forming a crooked forest of sorts.

There's one near me with its spearhead pointing skyward, still reflecting bone-chilling light, and skewered on it is a head. The spearhead is buried deep in the broken neck and blood flows down along the spear, dyeing the ground below maroon. The eyes are still open as if it has witnessed the ruthless murder of this land.

A plot of land has been cleared already before me and the soldiers are stacking the bodies and covering them in tung oil. These stacks are numerous and the soldiers quietly stand in a half-circle around it.

I raise my hand and crack my whip.

They pitch the torches forth and fire rises up to swallow the pile of bodies, painting the sky red as if it has caught on fire. The blaze turns the many mounds of bodies into a mountain of fire and smoke. A nauseating odour of burning corpses spreads with the smoke across the land.

I take the wine that is served. I cast my voice out loudly after clearing my throat.

“You are the warriors of Great Rui, the heroes of Great Rui! Your sacrifice shall be respected by the generations to come and your stories shall forever be told. **I** thank you. Great Rui thanks you. The world thanks you!”

“Your accomplishments shall be remembered by everyone. **I** shall care for your parents and adopt your wife and children. **I** ask that you all rest assured and head on your way!”

Heng Ziyu and I share a look before drinking the glass of wine in one gulp. I pick up another glass and pour it out in an arc.

This adds a fragrant wisp of wine into the cold air which is mixed with the stench of corpses and the coolness of snow.

I look to the north through the rising smoke at the six hundred *li* of plains and the most majestic pass, South Hill Pass, and beyond that the ever-flowing Rope Hill Creek, and finally the wild, boundless desert.

My emotions fluctuate as I gaze northward and no one makes a sound.

Have you finally let go, Murong Yu?

If so, I hope you get everything that you want: hailing the land and ruling the realm.

I'm just not sure what the two of us should do when that happens.

I hear a horse approaching, its hooves beating on the ground. Its rider jumps off and hands a military report on his palms. I take it and scan it quickly before tossing it to Heng Ziyu calmly.

“Your Majesty?” he calls out uncertainly.

“The last thirty thousand Yan soldiers to leave have made camp north of Rope Hill Creek. It does not look like they are going to return for the time being.” I chuckle while my chest burns as if someone rubbed salt on a wound.


He opens it and only takes a glimpse.

“Do You regret not giving chase?”

I yank on the reins and turn around. “**I** am just glad **I** have given my all.”

²⁰⁴ A small stop along the main highways with facilities like lodging, food, lavatory.

XLI: A New Era

he Sixth Year of Nan Jing. There has been a lot of snowfall, forming a thick blanket over the dark red dirt. Feathery flakes of snow flutters in the air and the entire world seems to be white. Thick quilts cover the doors and windows of the palace. The maids keep adding beast-shaped coals to the censers around the room. The fire crackles and the warmth entices me to sleep.

I recline on the *ta* with my chin on my left hand. I yawn carelessly and the maid beside me quickly lowers her head and curls into herself. I frown. I was just yawning. It's not that scary, is it?

I nod at her and she obediently holds up a cup of tea. Then, she starts massaging my legs. I take a sip and I feel the drowsiness coming back.

Someone starts coughing, not loudly, but I can hear the displeasure. I open my eyes and smile. "Don't be mad, Master. Go on. I'm listening."

Master Liao is sitting in the lower seat with a face that says 'what do I do with you?'

"Your Majesty, even though the Yan have retreated, it would be best if You have a grasp of the situation in Yongjing."

I shrug. "You have already said what needs to be said. What more could I add?" I say as I hand the cup back to the maid. "Plus, you just came back from over there, you must know more than **me**."

He sighs and shows the same frustrated expression as when I used to slack off and try to skip classes. He could still hit my hands with a ruler back then and punish me as much as he wanted but now he can only sigh quietly.

I snicker while he clears his throat.

"Why don't You take a stab at the current situation in Yan?"

I'm a bit reluctant but I still answer him. "What else is there to say? The eldest prince rushed back at the last minute and foiled the second prince and other princes' plans. The emperor woke up on his deathbed and gave the eldest prince the power to govern the country in his place." I take a pause. "Which basically means that the eldest prince is going to be the next emperor."

Contrary to my retelling the story in a few short words, the reality was much more complicated:

Yongjing fell into a tense, anxious state while Murong Yu was racing nonstop back to Yongjing. The second prince and the right minister had already deployed most of the troops in the capital but made it seem like they hadn't. The empress ordered the imperial guards to shut the palace gates. They were waiting for Murong Yu to walk into their trap.

Eighty thousand lighthorses and thirty thousand Blood Mounts arrived at Yongjing. Murong Yu proclaimed that the second prince and the right minister were plotting against the crown and threatening the empress in an attempt to take the throne. Although most of the capital's troops were being forced to obey the right minister, Murong Yu had a strong footing in the army. Many generals laid down their arms after hearing that the eldest prince had returned. The second prince's shiny, spotless imperial guards were nothing when faced with the bloody, victorious warriors. The left minister's forces within the palace suddenly moved out. The empress admitted to her crimes. All imperial guards in the palace surrendered.

That night was horrendous. The skies above the towering palaces glowed red from the roaring fires. The palace gates swung open and Murong Yu entered, stepping on the blood running on the ground. The second prince placed all his chips into one last bet and attempted to assassinate his older brother with his personal guards. However, the distance of just a hundred *zhang* became an uncrossable divide. Deadly arrows shot out from the crooks and corners and his guards used their own bodies as shields to protect him as they pushed forward. The moment the prince drew out his sword, a wolf-tooth white-feathered arrow went straight for him and took his life.

The death of the second prince ended the fight between the princes. The third prince accepted Murong Yu's conditions and knelt down as his subject. The royal palace's gates opened wide and the thousands of Blood Mounts surged into the palace in the midst of the faint, early morning rays. Murong Yu was brought to the main palace building by the soldiers and there, the royal families and the officials were awaiting their new ruler under the watch of the soldiers. Some were still unwilling to give up and accused Murong Yu of harming one's own blood, to which Murong Yu replied with a stack of letters exchanged between the second prince and the enemy state. Instantly, the nobles and officials were silenced.

In his sleeping quarters, the dying emperor opened his eyes and flashed a tired smile at Murong Yu as he handed him the decree he had written previously.

The land that is Great Yan shall welcome its new ruler.

"The prince royal had a private talk with me after the he received the position of acting-emperor." He chuckles. "He said I know too much and he should not allow me to come back, but he let it go on the account of Your Majesty."

I press my lips together as a curiously depressing emotion appears for a moment.

"What do you think of this person, Master?"

The smile on his face fades away and is replaced with solemnity. "The prince royal speaks calmly, but his aura is rather fierce and one can feel the thirst for war and strive for success from it. I would think that he will become a great lord." His tone and expression become harsh as he

continues. “However, this person is extremely ambitious and comes from the military. I’m afraid that the world is going to suffer when he becomes emperor.”

I still remember what *he* had once said.

The throne to an empire—now which man wouldn’t want that?

I sigh out of melancholy but flash a thin smile as I grow sorrowful.

Master Liao’s tone abruptly takes a quick turn. “There is one thing I would like to ask, Your Majesty, and I hope You will be honest with me.”

“Please, Master.”

“The prince royal said to me, ‘I hope His Majesty has not forgotten what he promised.’” His gaze is intense, not giving me room to hide. “If I may ask, what is this promise exactly?”

I cough out of awkwardness as I scream ‘crap!’ in my head. Master Liao has a straightforward temper. He would jump up here and rip me into pieces if he knew the three conditions I have promised to Murong Yu.

“Um, well, it’s okay if you do not know.”

“Your Majesty!” he warns.

No matter what I do or say, I won’t be getting away unscathed today so I can only dismiss the servants and tell him in nervous stutters. As expected, he springs up to his feet and glares angrily at me, flames of fury burning in his eyes.

“Your Majesty, the land of Rui should not be trespassed, not even an inch, by foreign peoples. This is what so many young men have bled and died for! How could You just hand over seven hundred *li* of land to an outsider?!”

Filled with anguish, I can only pull a bitter smile.

The people all think the Yan army retreated because they were forced to while Master thought we altered the Yan’s plans solely with the disturbance in Yongjing. They would never know that if someone like Murong Yu was angered, the end result would be even more horrifying than a massacre.

I did everything in my power, working within the constraints of each force of power, only hoping to salvage my country.

Giving away seven hundred *li* of land is going to be an unchangeable flaw in my section of the history books. But I know better than they that Great Rui cannot withstand another hit. She needs time to recover.

Murong Yu still needs to face the many parties within his country. He has too many people to soothe and manage. He won’t have the opportunity to invade again within the next ten years.

Seven hundred *li* of land for several years of peaceful recovery is more valuable than going insane from fighting back against the Yan army.

“All that **I** have learnt was taught by you, Master,” I reply calmly. “You told me, ‘where there is life there is hope.’ **I** was unwilling to relocate the capital because **I** wanted to tell them that we cannot be conquered and now **I** am parting with the country because **I** want to tell them that we

will have the chance to rise again if we endure the present. The two messages do not contradict each other.”

Master Liao watches me steadily while the emotions fluctuate in his eyes.

“They can call **me** spineless or they can call me weak but the day will come when they understand **me**.” I let out a deep sigh.

“Your Majesty,” Master Liao lowers his head. “You speak rightly but if we really are to give the land away, the court officials...”

“Sure, **I** will have to take a few bad words but **I**’ve had worse. It does not matter.”

He is bowed so low I cannot see his face clearly, so I just let out a scoff. “It’s not just you who are mad. **I** bet **my** dad and mom would disown **me** if they heard of this down there. But, it is impossible to please everybody as the emperor.”

Master Liao raises his head and his expression changes slightly as he gets up from his seat.

I sigh, “**I** do not wish for Great Rui’s lands to be divided either but what can **I** do? Between annihilation and resting time, **I** had no other choice but this. **I**’ve already done all that **I** could.”

The hall is eerily silent for a moment.

Master Liao lifts up the train of his robe and kneels down on one knee. “I cannot express my gratitude for Your Majesty’s honesty. ‘Tis an emperor who endures that which others cannot.”

I crack a smile. That is definitely true.

“Ever since Your ascension, I have witnessed You growing day by day and I feel relieved that I have not let down His Lordship’s wishes. I have one favour to beg of You now.”

I nod. “Yes, please, Master.”

“I am reaching old age and Your Majesty does not need my assistance anymore. I beg that You grant my wishes to retire and return home.”

“But **I** remember you said that you don’t have a home anymore, Master.”

“I beg that You grant the Xiang Lu Academy to me. I will continue being a teacher.”

I’m slightly taken by surprise. Xiang Lu Academy is the most accredited academy aside from the Capital University. I can make a few guesses as to why he would ask for retirement—it’s none other than for those reasons that cannot be spoken of—but why would he ask for the academy?

He looks at me with a smirk. “I think someone needs to teach those academics and students the reason behind Your actions.”

I laugh along and wave my hand. “Granted.”

Master Liao looks back down in contemplation and asks after a while, “What do You want to do with His and Her Lordship’s remains?”

“**I** asked some older servants in the palace,” I answer in a depressed tone. “Mother was buried in a small coffin in the Empress and Cypress²⁰⁵ Garden in the south of the city. **I** do not know about Father. Do you?”

He nods solemnly.

“Then I’ll ask that you please retrieve Father’s remains in secret. I will find a good time in the near future to give him a posthumous title and build a temple in his honour. Then we would have one less thing to worry about.”

He kneels down and touches his head to the ground. “You have my gratitude, Your Majesty.”

I proceed to yawn. “This is not all you came for today, right?”

“Two more things.” He continues after a short pause. “First, You are of age to choose an empress and take in consorts.”

I was in the middle of drinking tea when he spoke and I almost spit it out. I take a handkerchief and wipe my mouth. “Master,” I say with a frown. “Those old farts are annoying enough. Why are you nagging at **me** too?”

He frowns back at me. “You are already twenty-one years old. Commoners this age would have many children already. Furthermore, the royal family is the ruler of this land and Your Majesty taking a wife is for the sake of the land. It symbolises the miracle of birth and is the auspice of the people. The country is currently recovering from chaos. Naming an empress and consorts is a good way to soothe the people.”

Here we go again!

I wave my hand at him to stop. “Master, if you want to lecture **me**, at least pick something new. Those old farts must have said it a hundred times already. Leading a good example this, fulfilling an emperor’s duty that, blah blah blah.” I get moody as I go on. “According to the ceremonial laws, the emperor takes nine women’s hand in marriage. They just don’t want to see **me** live long, do they?”

He seems to heave a sigh, looking helpless. “Great Rui’s ceremonial laws state that the emperor must take nine women: one wife, the empress; two concubines, the royal consorts; and each one brings along two accompanying concubines. Your Majesty does not have any wives or concubines as of now, so it must be so.”

I grit my teeth because I just want to turn and escape, not wanting to listen to what he has to say anymore.

“This is Your responsibility, Your Majesty. You must act appropriately.”

“All right, all right, all right!” My head is starting to hurt again. “You just want **me** to get a wife, right? Let’s at least wait until spring.”

“If You want to marry in spring, we must begin planning and settle on the proper persons now.” He drops his smile and his eyes flash with wariness. “Inside the palace and outside the palace as well, every party must be considered.”

My head is swimming with thoughts and frustration and my heart feels constricted as though an invisible hand is tugging at it.

Marriage, bleh. It’s finally here. I thought I could stall it indefinitely but it seems I have no chance of avoiding it now.

“His and Her Lordship—bless their souls—would be delighted to see Your Majesty marry and bear children, continuing the lineage.”

Annoyed, I interrupt him. "Enough. **I** got it. Next."

He watches me for a bit before asking tentatively, "What do You plan to do with regards to the Protector of the Seas?"

I heave a deep breath and lie back down on the *ta* while rubbing my temple.

"What else? He made the highest contribution during the siege. It's only natural that **I** promote him and raise his peerage," I say as I look right back at him. "**I** know what he's thinking and **I** know what he wants."

"Although this siege has taken a toll on his power, he is not to be underestimated. It is wise to make preparations now."

For a moment, I'm not sure what to say. After some contemplation, I tell him, "**I** have thought about it. **I** won't make things sour between us as long as he stay put for two or three years. Raising his peerage and his salary, also those of all of his soldiers, as long as he doesn't push **my** limit, **I** can turn a blind eye."

He stays quiet so I continue after a while, "If it must be, **I** won't hold back. It is not up to **me**, but Heng Ziyu." I heave a sigh. "This country cannot take another hit."

He finally makes a sound, "The army and the officials need to be calmed and soothed after this war. Why don't You start with the Protector of the Seas? Position and peerage seem rather conventional. If You would like, forming familial bonds through marriage is also an option."

"Do you mean marrying a princess off to him?" I confirm hesitantly, "There are still two princesses not yet in wedlock. If possible, we can choose one and **I** will request the empress dowager's blessings."

"That is an option, of course. Your Majesty can also take someone's hand in marriage, especially a daughter of the military. I heard that the Protector of the Sea's younger sister has not wedded yet," he speaks calmly.

I'm puzzled for a second but I realize right away. "Now you're just not playing fair, Master. You set **me** up."

"It is commonplace for the ruler and subject to become in-laws. The Protector of the Seas seems to love his sister very much. You must consider everything, Your Majesty."

I purse my lips as I don't know what to say.

Of course it's normal for the emperor to reach an alliance and display friendliness with his subjects through women and marriage. The subject in turn uses this to solidify his family's power. If she happens to give birth to a prince, then the child becomes another powerful political leverage.

I sigh. "Once a teacher, always a father, Master. Why can't you be more considerate of **my** future happiness? Don't just push whatever you see onto **me**. **I** still want to live a long life, okay?"

He stops and frowns at me, but finally turns his head away and sighs.

Not getting married is probably just my wishful thinking. I need to have an empress and consorts and continue the royal lineage so long as I'm still the emperor. Master is right. This is my responsibility. Whether I want to or not, I have to.

What about you, Murong Yu? You have to marry Xiao Qinyun in order to repay the left minister, and you probably have to make her your empress after ascending the throne, right?

Being loyal to one another is just the most beautiful illusion. Not to mention, neither you nor I ever made such pledges anyways.

I let out a deep sigh as my temples start stinging painfully like a spike.

The wisps of pain are slow but strong, turning into a dull ache in the deepest part of my heart.



Five days later, the military and civil officials in the capital gather at the Yuanxiao banquet. Many military officials have brought their family. The festivity has cleaned out the gloominess from the war and the capital, after the storm, has begun to return to its original prosperity.

The glazed lanterns light up when night falls, and the banquet begins.

Music fills the hall, sliding between the seats. The opulence of the royal family is apparent. Silk veils and lanterns hang high along the building and corridors, casting fuzzy, enigmatic light and shadows. Maidservants adorned with pearl and jade stand behind the guests, pouring wine with a coy smile. It is a picture of luxury.

I've never enjoyed loud and crowded occasions. After drinking all the toasts from my subjects while sitting at the foremost seat, I exit discreetly, leaving them to their fun and games.

Walking down the tiled steps covered by a silk carpet, I notice a brightly lit chamber a little ways off. I can faintly hear music and the shy laughs of girls. I ask Liu An beside me, "What is going on over there?"

"That is Yao Guang²⁰⁶ Hall. The female family members are there."

I nod as the winds pick up. I wrap the fox fur cloak tighter around myself and lower my head. I just want to go back as soon as possible. When I reach the corridor in front of the hall, I spot a petit figure looking around.

"Who is it?" I call out.

The person halts and quickly runs over. With the light, I see that it's a young girl wearing puce²⁰⁷ coloured palatial attire and dangling trinkets. Her face glows healthily under the hazy lantern light and her eyes are beautiful.

Wearing only thin indoor attire, she seems to be shivering from the night wind. She looks at me with a careful expression, "Excuse me, um, how do I get to Yao Guang Hall? I came out for just a second and now I can't find my way back."

Liu An looks like he's about to scold her but I stop him. Seeing her shivering, I take off my fox fur and put it on her. "Are you a family member attending the banquet?"

She pulls the cloak close and nods. "I came with my brother. He's in the hall over there."

I think about it for a bit. She's probably what she says she is, so I tell her, "Yao Guang Hall is not far from here. I, ahem, I will walk you back."

She stays still while looking me up and down with her big, round eyes. She sticks her tongue out playfully. "I'm holding you to that."

She keeps studying me. "Are you a duke?"

I'm not sure how to reply. "Something like that." She quickly adds, "Then have you seen the emperor?"

Before I can answer, she starts off on her own. "The rumour goes amongst the civilians that the emperor is handsome and talented. He is able as well, able to go up against the enemy army and their marshall. Even the Yan army is afraid of him."

I find this girl lively and innocent and I start chuckling. "That is because he was lucky."

She turns around when I say this and glares at me with what appears to be discontentment. "How could you say that about him? He is a hero who can ride into battle and wield his weapon, unlike you who has peerage at such a young age and only lives each day idly, not wanting to better yourself."

I burst out in laughter and shake my head. This girl really is naive. I wonder whose sister she is. What a funny character.

With that in mind, I tease her, "So, it appears you have fallen for him?"

A red flush appears on her cheeks as she bites her lips. "I haven't seen him yet. Earlier at the banquet, I heard some noblewomen speaking about him, saying that he's handsome and he's a gentleman..." Her voice trails off so that I can barely catch the end.

I fix the cloak for her and tell her quietly, "You should not marry the emperor."

She looks up with her bottom lip still in her teeth. "Why not?"

"He will have many other women and you will only be one of them. If he does not adore you and have you in his heart, you will just stay in the palace, separated from your family for the rest of your life." I let out a scoff. "Spending the final days of life and dying alone, is that not—"

"I don't believe you one bit." Her brows furrow together.

I chuckle at her reply. She pouts and doesn't talk to me again. Thankfully, we have arrived at Yao Guang Hall. I stand at the bottom of the stairs and say to her, "You go on inside. I will take my leave."

She looks back with a confused expression. "You braced the cold wind for so long after letting me wear your cloak. At least warm up inside before you go."

I shake my head with a smile. "It's fine. Also, keep in mind what I said earlier."

I have not yet taken a step when she jumps down the steps and latches on my sleeve. "Wait. Tell me your name."

I look at the girl in front of me and reach up to fix the cloak. "It's naught but a chance meeting."

Before I finish, someone calls out from behind me in a deep voice, "Watch your behaviour, Zixiang."

Heng Ziyu walks over briskly wearing a light cloak and casual dress with his hair coiffed. It gives a different feel compared to the armour that he usually wears. Bewilderment flashes in his eyes when he spots me and he tries to kneel down to perform the rituals but I stop him with a signal.

The girl calls brightly, “Brother.” I slowly turn to look at her. A-hah, I see.

“So this is your sister, Heng Zixiang. What a rare beauty.” He and I smile at each other as I take back the hand around the cloak collar. His expression returns to normal and he nods. “My sister does not understand the rules of the palace. I ask...to forgive us.”

I ignore the weird emotion in his eyes and flash a smile to the girl. “Your name is Heng Zixiang?”

The girl nods furiously while showing a sweet smile. “Yeah, Brother usually calls me ‘Ah-Yao.’”

I sneak a glance at Heng Ziyu before laughing meaningfully, “Ah-Yao, it’s a nice name.”

Heng Ziyu’s face turns even sourer by the second but I pretend as if I can’t see it. I lean in closer and lift up a strand of her hair. “I am thinking of a folk song,” I say as I sniff it. “The Xiang²⁰⁸ splish and splash, the Yao²⁰⁹ ladies twirl and swirl; the beauties await their lovers by the hazy banks.”

Heng Zixiang immediately lowers her head and drops her gaze, and blushes after hearing my words.

I glance at Heng Ziyu from the corner of my eye while smirking. “You are here to pick Your sister up, right, Marshal? I will stop being a bother now. The night is dark and cold. Careful not to let her catch a cold, now.” Then, I let out an ambiguous chuckle as I stride away.

I hear a yelp of surprise from behind me and Heng Zixiang’s soft, shaky voice asking, “Brother...was that His Majesty?”

I chortle. This girl is indeed very interesting.



The beginning of April. Spring has brought back hope for the future and the spirits of the people have settled down for now.

I release a decree, changing the era name to Yan Xing²¹⁰, making it the First Year of Yan Xing.

Heng Ziyu is given the title of Duke of Huai Nan²¹¹. Xu Zheng is given the posthumous title of Marquis of Guang De²¹². The ones who were brave and active in the war out of the remaining officials and soldiers are all promoted and awarded with a large amount of gold and silver.

I deploy twenty-five thousand lighthorses to be stationed south of Rope Hill Creek, across from the Yan soldiers on the other side. I also gather the refugees who have lost their homes due to

the war south of Rope Hill Creek and teach them farming techniques to develop the land and recover production.

Master, on the other hand, has secretly transported Father's remains back to the capital. Father and Mother's remains are being kept temporarily in the underground hall of the Yi Xin Temple until the appropriate occasion comes along for me to give them posthumous titles. Under my request, Master has not immediately gone to Xiang Lu Academy, but instead returned to Father's enfeoffment, the County of Feng Hai, to secretly prepare for war.



The month of May in the First Year of Yan Xing, the Yan Emperor passed away to heaven. The country mourned. The princes, dukes and the officials cried until the night in Feng Zi Palace and Chong De Hall. The next day, a decree was announced and the prince royal ascended the throne. The Archduke of Zhen Guo²¹³, the Left Minister, Xiao Yong, and the Marshal of Jian Wei²¹⁴, Yuwen Yuan were to assist the emperor in governing the country.

Soon after, the new emperor changed the era name to Tian De²¹⁵.



Hundreds or thousands of years later, all that will be left in the historical records are a few lines of words like this, erasing the disaster and bloodshed that accompanies every ascension of a new emperor. With the skilled brush of a historian, all that is left is the peace between each word.

I close the official letter from Yan and crack a smile to the kneeling officials below me. "Do not forget, everyone, that this is only the beginning."

They all raise their heads and look at me with worry.

Holding my smile, I glance at Heng Ziyu. He is now wearing the Nine Ornaments Panlong Regalia stitched with gold befitting of a prince. The air he gives off is mighty and overwhelming, making it hard to look directly at him.

His gaze is not sharp and intrusive but rather dark and bottomless, and on his lips dances a calm and collected smile.



The month of September in the First Year of Yan Xing, delegates arrive in the capital from Yan to deliver another official letter requesting the meeting of the emperors of the two countries at the border of Rope Hill Creek to discuss the ownership of the seven hundred *li* of land.

The letter has caused a controversy in the court when many auditors expressed strong opinions against the emperor personally attending the meeting, but I cast aside all the arguments and make up my mind to go.

Murong Yu, if you dare invite me then I dare accept!

²⁰⁵ The name consists of the names of two trees, the empress tree and the cypress tree.

²⁰⁶ 瑤光 (yao2 guang1), literally 'jade light,' or 'precious light.'

²⁰⁷ The exact colour is shown in a picture below. This traditional colour is described as a darkish purple-red and symbolises the strength of women.

²⁰⁸ Xiang is a river in Southern China that originates in Guangxi and flows through Hunan and into the Yangtze. The abbreviation of Hunan, Xiang, comes from this river.

²⁰⁹ Yao is an ethnic minority, mainly found in Guangxi and Hunan.

²¹⁰ 炎興 (yan2 xing1), literally 'flames (become) lively.'

²¹¹ 淮南 (huai2 nan2), is a modern city in Anhui.

²¹² 廣德 (guang3 de2), literally 'vast virtue.'

²¹³ 鎮國 (zhen4 guo2), 'settle (the) country.'

²¹⁴ 建威 (jian4 wei1), literally 'establish power.'

²¹⁵ 天德 (tian1 de2), literally 'heavenly virtue.'

XLII: Conclave

Hrisk autumn winds pick up, sweeping across the great plains. Slender blades of grass sway and shuffle along. The sun in the distance appears to be blocked, coating everything in sight in dim yellow, and it's so quiet that it's easy to start imagining things.

I squint as I study the distance.

The cool wind brushes past my ears, bringing along with it the tang of grass and soil and also the faintest stench of blood.

The fall showers have diluted the blood in the ground. The dead, yellow leaves are doing a poor job of hiding the thousands of skeletons. My horse whinnies uneasily and looks from side to side warily as it steps over the maroon earth.

I spur my steed forward and immediately I hear a deep voice coming from behind me.
“Careful, Your Majesty.”

I reply without looking back, “I do not wish to see the remains, Duke.”

In the distance, I can see a pure white military tent surrounded by blinding light and a field of red. I hear the clanging of metals around me and see the soldiers in front of me draw their weapons with a stony look on their faces.

We approach the tent and when we are only two hundred steps or so away, the Blood Mounts charge towards us, spreading out into the two lines to form a V and fence in our party.

I lower my head, pretending to not have seen that, and feel the nephrite lightly bouncing on my chest with each of the horse's strides.

As we draw near, a Yan cavalryman rides forth, greeting me before turning back around to lead the way. The soldiers behind me are stopped and they are forced to halt their horses and wait alertly with their swords raised. There are already around a hundred soldiers standing in formation before the tent. Their black armour covers themselves and their steeds. The ink black spears and the glistening spear tips form an eerily glowing forest.

The guiding soldier nods and the formation scatters outward like the tide washing away, parting a path for three riders. I spur my horse forward and I sense the person behind me following

close behind. The warriors around us let out a low bellow and stick their spears diagonally into the air to crisscross with one another, blocking the light overhead.

I pull a thin smile and sit straighter. "Duke of Huai Nan, what do you think of this formation?"

Heng Ziyu raises his voice. "It certainly looks fancy."

By now we have reached the tent. The soldier dismounts and kneels down before the tent.

"Your Majesty, the Emperor of Great Rui and the Duke of Huai Nan have arrived."

"Welcome in." It's a man's voice but not that person's.

I dismount and just as I take one step a guard comes up to me. "Weapons are not allowed inside, Your Majesty."

"It's fine. Come in, please."

The guard immediately backs off and lifts up the tent flap with respect.

The gold-painted cow hide tent held up by eighteen poles is large enough to ride a horse in. A fresh fragrance meanders in the air as a light foggy substance seeps out from a censer shaped like an animal's face. Behind the censer stands a young man wearing formal Yan silk ceremonial attire and a small smile. He bows slightly and signals for me to sit down in the prearranged seat. I lift up my train and take my seat casually while Heng Ziyu stands behind me.

Beyond the lazy smoke is an elevated couch, and beyond that are a few civil officials with their heads bowed. Murong Yu is reclined on the couch, dressed in golden armour and a black robe with a long sword the colour of spotty black hanging from his waist. He turns his enigmatic gaze over to me, piercing like the blade tip, as dark as obsidian.

I face him calmly without hiding. I then flash a thin smile while resting my elbow on the arm of the chair and my head on my hand.

The young man wearing formal ceremonial clothes gestures with a smile. "Since the Emperor of Great Rui has arrived, let us begin. I am Xiao Xiao, the Left Deputy Minister of Great Yan, here to direct the negotiation for a peace treaty on behalf of His Majesty's wishes."

No one else speaks so there is only his voice in the tent.

"The civilians of both countries are the ones who are hurt the most from war. We both suffered severe losses in the battle last year. Our army had to retreat due to the mutiny in the capital. Although Great Rui has settled back down, it cannot withstand another hit, and we do not wish to push either. If I may so suggest, it is the best time to negotiate a treaty."

The proud tone right off the bat is making me angry. I take a glimpse at Murong Yu to find him playing with his sword hilt with his head lowered. His expression is hard to define but his eyes look a bit unfocused.

"Our army had been triumphant during the war, seizing several counties, killing more than fifty thousand cavalymen and capturing countless prisoners, not to mention equipment and weaponry. At one point, we even laid siege to your capital." His smile becomes tinged with spite. "According to our scouts, Rui only seems to have fifty thousand lighthorses unscathed while the rest have suffered greatly. I hope my information is correct."

Heng Ziyu lets out a soft scoff. “When Yan invaded, it was proclaimed that the army numbered two hundred and thirty thousand. Less than one hundred fifty thousand remained when you retreated. In that sense, Yan appears to have suffered more than us, not to mention that the war was initiated by Yan.”

Xiao Xiao starts to laugh. “What a straightforward person you are, Duke of Huai Nan. However, I do not see any fault in this. The victor is king while the defeated is the sinner. This is the natural law of the world.”

“If that is so, why does the Yan army show no mercy towards helpless civilians? They are not even treated as beings! Is this what you call military prowess?!” Then Heng Ziyu snorts disdainfully. “Just barbarians, after all.”

Xiao Xiao isn’t angered by Heng Ziyu’s attitude. “Helpless? Then why did your emperor request the shooting of Rui refugees? I thought Rui has always put benevolence first. Not just watching your citizens starve, you even fired at them. You call us barbarians but who here is the barbaric one?”

It takes Heng Ziyu a moment before he scoffs coldly. “The refugees were naught but human shields used for your invasion. You herded them because you had something to gain. Your emperor, His Majesty, said he wishes to secure grazing land for the Yan herdsman, but we, the people of Great Rui, are also humans who have our needs. We just want to protect our country and our land. We are only barbaric because you made us to be!”

“Nice,” Murong Yu interrupts as his arrow-like gaze is aimed behind me.

I let out a dry laugh. “Let us skip the chitchat and speak to the important matters.”

“If Your Majesty insists,” Xiao Xiao bows towards me and says, “I shall take the offer.”

“Cede the seven hundred *li* of land north of Rope Hill Creek to Yan; Rui soldiers shall not cross Rope Hill Creek; Yan shall erect a city northwest of the river, station five thousand soldiers and establish a protectorate general.”

“Is that all?”

“Great Rui shall offer annual tribute of two thousand pikuls of quality rice, one thousand bolts of silk, eight hundred *jin*²¹⁶ of tea leaves and numerous porcelain—no less and no delays.” His smile is so faint I can barely see it.

I still have mine on my face but I spit venomously at him, “You have missed one more thing, Deputy Minister Xiao.”

“What may that be, Your Majesty?” He sounds confused.

I shoot up from my seat. “You forgot to make Great Rui offer a princess to serve your emperor, make us suffer shame for the generations to come for begging for peace with women!”

Murong Yu’s head snaps up and his gaze bores into me.

I take another step forward, pointing at Xiao Xiao. “The only person worthy of negotiating with **me** is your emperor!” I say with my nose in the air. “I need to hear him say it himself that he wants **me** to hand him everything on two hands as the loser! Whether that be Great Rui’s princess or **my** life!”

Murong Yu lowers his head again and after his frame shudders a bit, he gets up and walks up to me.

He stops one step away from me. His face is pale and bony and his lips are tightly pursed, forming a blade-like line. His eyes, however, are as piercing as always.

I flash a smile at him.

“Nice, very nice,” he says under his breath before chuckling. “You...you are the same old.”

“I could say the same, Your Highness, Prince Lie. You seem even gloomier than before.”

Shocked gasps fill the tent²¹⁷.

“It wouldn’t be you if you agreed so easily.”

I replied coolly after a short pause. “Your conditions are too harsh. I cannot agree to them.” He retorts just as coolly, “You brought these up before yourself. How can you take it back?”

“The seven hundred *li* I had offered was in exchange for a full retreat, but you didn’t do that,” I explain as I stare at him. “You left thirty thousand men north of Rope Hill Creek when you left, so you violated our contract first.”

He raises a brow and his voice hints anger. “Would you have come to negotiate with me if not for the thirty thousand?”

As our gazes connect, the anger disappears in an instant. I take a deep breath. “Wasn’t that just to put pressure on me? Thirty thousand lighthorses, six hundred *li* of flat plains from South Hill Pass to the capital: you just didn’t want me to rest easy on my throne.”

He leans in a little and presses his voice lower. “You’re blaming me.”

“I’m just pointing out the truth.” I chuckle.

He lets out a laugh. His brows arch up, making his expression look softer. He watches me and sighs after a while.

“I can’t give you all seven hundred *li*.” I wipe my smile off. “There’s a line for everything. Don’t be too greedy.”

“What do you want?”

“We each take one step back. The annual tributes can stay the same but I can’t part with all the land.”

He contemplates for a bit. “Each take a step back? You mean splitting the seven hundred *li* in half?”

I give him a dirty look. “Why not? There is a river called Ye three hundred *li* north of Rope Hill Creek. With the Ye as the boundary, the north will belong to you and the south will belong to me.” Then I add, “The water is plentiful and the grass is lush north of the Ye. The land is flat and good for grazing, too.”

He looks at me out of the corner of his eye. “The water and grass are probably even better in the south. You wouldn’t let it go to waste by turning it into farming land, would you? I don’t think you’re that stupid.”

“Take care of yourself,” I pull a smile slowly as I say, “before taking care of others.”

I spot the change in Xiao Xiao's expression and add, "This negotiation can't go on when we are at each other's throats."

He waves a hand. "A welcome toast for His Majesty's long journey."

A maidservant steps out from behind the curtains only wearing a translucent robe held together by beads. She staggers over with her head bowed and holds a silver tray up to us.

I stay put as he looks at me. Then he picks up one glass. I smile and reach out for one too but the man behind me snatches it instead. Heng Ziyu has a stony expression. "It is not too late to drink this after the negotiation!"

The maidservant shakes even more and her head bends lower.

Murong Yu turns to face the speaker. He stares at Heng Ziyu with a very scrutinizing gaze while a cold smile dances about his lips. "Protector of the Seas? Or should I say Duke of Huai Nan?"

Fury is apparent on Heng Ziyu's face. His lips are pressed into a line and the knuckles around the glass are white.

Murong Yu smirks arrogantly at him. "I am speaking to His Majesty, your emperor. As a subject, you have no right to interrupt."

Heng Ziyu's face gets darker by the second. His frame quivers and a few drops of liquid splash out from the glass.

Murong Yu turns his head away as he takes a sip of wine before passing it to me. "The Yan tradition is to drink in celebration when there are no more disagreements," he says as he glances at Heng Ziyu. "And since Your wine has been taken by Your subject, please have this."

I pause in puzzlement but I understand in an instant. He must have meant...

I take another good look at Murong Yu. After spotting hints of warmth in his eyes, I take the glass. His cold fingertips slightly brush me. I turn the glass bottom-up after a moment of hesitation and drink it all.

I toss the glass back onto the tray. "Then it shall be as Your Majesty said. The four hundred *li* north of the Ye shall belong to Yan and the three hundred *li* south of it shall belong to Rui. You may decide for Yourself whether to station soldiers or not."

Murong Yu rubs his lips together a little before shouting in another direction. "Retrieve **my** seal!"

Murong Yu and I use our own seals and stamp the two treaties added with the conditions we agreed upon in thick ink. With that, bright red vermillion is left upon the page.

I roll up the paper and look at him with a smile. "Since the negotiation is complete, I shall take **my** leave. Goodbye!"

"One moment, please." I hear when I reach the tent entrance.

I halt and turn my head a little. "Is there anything else?"

He sighs and shakes his head. "No."



Late autumn is chilly and desolate in the frontiers. The wind swooshes low across the plains. The tent is very spacious and the cold air sneaks in every now and then before slipping back out, making a low howling sound.

I put down the tea that has nearly turned cold and pick up another memorial. I lie back on the *ta* and read over it carefully.

I've been here for half a month already. The weather has become cool and the negotiation is over. Logically, I should have left for the capital but for some reason I don't want to.

Maybe it's because of the freedom in the air here. Or maybe I just want to be closer to that person.

He is the same, still reluctant to return to Yongjing.

The two parties' tents are still standing on the wide, empty lands south of Rope Hill Creek, as if in a silent confrontation of their own.

I sit cross-legged after reading the memorials delivered by the fastest horses from the capital, and stare dumbly at the tent flap. The wind picks up the thick curtains, making it slap against the tent flap.

Stalling my time like this is probably just because I want to see him again. I know very well once I leave this time, I probably will never see him again. A pang of sorrow hits me. But I can't see him. Every time we meet, it would be under the eyes of everybody and what comes out of our mouths can only be formal, elevated speech. We will never have private time.

Heng Ziyu walks in and asks after performing the rituals. "When do You plan to return to the capital, Your Majesty?"

I sigh softly. "In a couple more days."

"Messengers have come from the capital urging Your return. I'm afraid the hearts of some may act up with Your absence."

Annoyed, I wave my hand. "I know what I am doing."

Heng Ziyu stares at me with confusion. "Your Majesty?" He then pauses and continues with his head lowered, "If I dare say, You and the Yan emperor seem to have known each other for a long time?"

I open my eyes. "What are You trying to say, Marshal?"

He lifts his head and his face spells a peculiar air. I face another direction and answer casually, "As You said, the Yan emperor and I are old friends, but that is just a thing of the past."

With complicated emotions flicking across his eyes, he opens his mouth as though to speak. I'm not in a good mood and I don't want to raise my voice at him so I just pull a thin smile. "Do not stare at **me** like that, Duke. **I** know that it was improper of **me** to tease Your sister. If **I** am to be

responsible and there is no way around that, I do not mind taking her hand in marriage. It is just that, well, I do not know how You feel about that, Duke.”

He shudders and nothing comes out of the opened mouth of his. Then, he bows down low. Awkwardness appears and I dismiss him. I lie back on the *ta* as sorrow seeps in followed by coldness the next moment. I don't even know what it is.

Heng Ziyu's gaze has become clearer and more unrestrained. I might be thick but even I can tell that there's something going on after all this time. However, I do not want to delve deeper.

That is his problem. I still have a say.

I let my eyes flutter close and amidst the blurriness I can almost see a pair of glowing eyes, intense with joy and ire as if to penetrate through my soul. Startled, I open my eyes only to find that I cannot see a thing. Something jerks at my heart and the pain spreads but doesn't fade away. After a while, I cannot bear with it anymore and jump up from the *ta* and walk out of the tent after throwing on a cape.

It is late dusk already. The clouds are stormy and the bloody sun has taken its hiding spot behind a group of mountain peaks. The spreads of clouds roll in from the north, shielding the entire sky.

I'm on an aimless stroll with about a hundred guards in my toll. I sigh, watching the grey peaks in the distance.

It was the same season when I had met him that year, yet in just one year, the world has tipped upside down and nothing is the same.

What a funny thing destiny is.

The guards beside me suddenly rush forth and block my path. This alarms me and brings me out of my deep thought. I find a squad of Yan cavalry about ten *zhang* away and Murong Yu is amongst them. His face and expression is half-hidden by the twilight.

Only when I scan around me do I realise I've unknowingly left the main camp. The two sides have stopped, locked in anticipation.

There seems to be a hint of a smile on his face. I smile back at him from afar.

Anymore anger and hatred will do nothing now that things have turned out like this, we can only face this with a smile. I am the emperor of Great Rui first, Han Xin second; he is the ruler of Great Yan first, Murong Yu second. This I know and he as well.



Following the signing of the treaty, the Yan emperor hosted a feast for Great Rui.



The moon is bright and the fire roars.

The empty lot on the outskirts of the thick forest is bustling with festivity and the aroma of wine and meat. Foreign instruments are being played and the exotic dancers are clad with thin and colourful robes that flutter in the wind, showing their delicate hourglass figures.

I look to the side and share a smile with Murong Yu. We raise our glasses and everyone in the feast follows suit and drink. Many frowns have been soothed flat with Jade Green Soul. When enough alcohol has been consumed, a few young fellows start singing and dancing around the campfire while the others start clapping and cheering them on.

I've just brought the glass to my lips when I stop as the realisation hits me: the drawn weapons are being sheathed and the looming shadow of war is dissipating.

Murong Yu leans over. "What're you thinking about?"

I turn to look at him. "That it's nice the war is over."

He snickers as he picks up his glass. "Some people say the emperor of Great Rui is a hero amidst a world of chaos and some people say he has no fears. They would never have guessed that their so-called hero thinks it's nice the war is over."

I let out a soft scoff. "The alliance between Great Yan and Great Rui has been on and off and the hatred between us was once very deep, but many peoples live amongst each other near the borders and intermarry. They are the innocent ones through the wars and battles all these years."

"Are you trying to persuade me to not invade?" He turns his gaze away and drinks out of his glass. I shake my head and answer, "The alliance of the two countries benefits all citizens. You want to be a legendary ruler, not a cruel one."

His frame quivers for a moment before returning to normal. He flashes a smile at me.

"As for me," I scoff at myself. "I don't want to be legendary. I'm fine as long as my citizens can live a good life."

As my eyes stray around, I find Heng Ziyu sitting on a seat far below me in the midst of a wild group of fun and alcohol while looking off to some other direction with a cool, emotionless look.

The crowd starts to get boisterous and the most men have squished in beside the seductive dancers. Suddenly, Murong Yu grabs my right hand that was hanging freely and leans in. His voice is husky and suggestive. "Let's go."

His words seem to contain a mystifying magic that I cannot fight it off.

I'm pulled by him quietly away from the crowd, leaving all the noise behind me. The wind of a late autumn evening is a bit chilly and blows away the alcohol buzz, leaving me a bit dizzy. We walk along the bumpy forest floor into the short forest. The world suddenly goes silent. The night sky reaches far and wide and the stars dazzle. The only sound left is the shuffling tree leaves.

He pushes me against the trunk of a tree and our bodies flank each other, unified even in respiration. Our alcohol-tainted breaths merge in the air.

His eyelids flutter down as he leans in a little. My mind goes blank from seeing his handsome face. Unknowingly, I lick my lips before tilting my head back and joining our lips together.

Our lips and tongue entangle with each other, sucking one another. His soft tongue brushes over my teeth and the roof of my mouth. Our breathing speeds up but neither of us wants to let go. Only when we cannot catch our breaths do we reluctantly separate.

I can't see anything clearly under the moonlight. His face seems to be coated with white frost. The breeze is gentle and the moon is bright. All of this just makes my heart beat faster and even gives me the pleasure of sinning.

He lowers his head a bit and presses his forehead on mine. I whisper, "We're just like a couple having an affair."

He chuckles. "We definitely are."

I purse my lips. "I just feel sinful when I think of the people who died in the battle, no matter who they were."

His hands reach around my waist and he breathes in my ear, "You're wrong. We're people being controlled by fate as well."

I look down in silence. His lips close around my earlobe and the hot air from his lungs tickles my skin. "The night is young. Let's not let it go to waste."

"We're finally able to meet in private," I say after the silence.

"Wasn't easy getting away from everybody, huh," he scoffs in a self-mocking way. "I just knew you want to see me from the way you looked at me, but you just won't say it." He tilts his head sideways as he studies me. "I really have no idea what I saw in you. You're awkward and not honest. You're still just a punk in my eyes even after becoming the emperor."

I stop the urge to cry that reach my throat and gulp it back down. How could I ruin a wonderful rendezvous? If I get to spend just a little more time with him, then I'll have bits and pieces I can treasure for the long road ahead of me, no matter how dark it gets.

He reaches up but drops his hand again. The voice in my ear is deep but distinct, tender to the point it makes my heart flutter. "Xin, I miss you."

My vision blurs up instantly. I shut my eyes tightly and whisper back, "I miss you, too."

"You..." His hand finally reaches my cheek. "You sure are honest this time."

My lips jerk into a bitter smile. I feel tears forming behind my eyes. "What's the use? When I used to be awkward with you, we could still make fun of each other. Now that I'm honest, there's no place for us to be together privately. We can't even say what we want."

He sighs quietly and holds me by the shoulders. He ducks down while lightly pinching my chin. The next thing I know, he's planting burning kisses from my forehead and brows to my cheeks and neck, finally ending with a long battle between our tongues. I pant as I feel his thin yet searing lips on my neck, causing numbness and tingling sensations.

"I think we met here, didn't we?" he says softly as he pulls my collar loose using his teeth and nibbling underneath gently.

"Yeah...it's been...over a year...hmm."

His tongue tip rolls over my collarbone, causing a strange shudder. I'm breathing hard as I clutch at his clothes. I suddenly feel thirsty as though I'm burning up. His hands move down to my waist, untying my belt and snaking in. He starts fondling me over a thin silk shirt.

He even teases me, "Not so tough and intimidating now, are we?"

I feel all my blood rushing to my face in an instant. I grit my teeth and glare at him who is snickering. "L-let me go!"

"Don't be so stubborn." He raises a brow. "I know you've wanted me a long time, am I right?"

My heart pounds and I push on his chest. "Not here—"

His lips block my words from being heard. After the kiss, he speaks with a light pant, "I came with two goals."

His palms bring scorching heat that passes through the silk onto my skin. "One, sign the treaty with the emperor of Great Rui; two, see if I can make you my prisoner and take you with me for the rest of my life."

His gaze is strong and a bit hazy with lust. His hands slide around my waist as he parts the layers of fabric and sneaks beneath the silk. My panting hastens and the sweet and bitter emotions surge in my heart. "And you said I'm inconsiderate and reckless. You're worse."

He closes in on my earlobe again. "I just wanna take my man with me. What's so reckless about that?" He presses me against the tree bark again so hard that I can't budge. His lips skim across my neck, making me tilt my head back and gasp for air. I feel his hot lips and tongue on my shoulder, sucking and licking.

Pain of a comfortable degree spreads from my collarbone and makes me burn and shudder. Unable to handle it, I turn my head away. He chortles, "Why, you don't like it?"

How could I not like it? I feel soft in the knees when he holds me and I can't help but anticipate his kiss and his love. Only in his arms can I depend on someone and let myself go without holding back.

Not to mention, this might just be the last time I can.

I shake my head, trying all I can to evade his lips. I grab his shoulders. "Not here. Someone will come."

He sucks on my earlobe and fondle it with his tongue. "If one of us was a woman, then it would be an epic tale of a romantic emperor. Sadly, when it's two men, we're only going to be shamed."

A bitter emotion pervades my chest and I lower my head as bits of anguish rise up, filling my heart to the brim so that it slightly aches.

He seems to have sensed my melancholy and reaches out to caress my face. "Don't think about it." His tone is a bit blue. "It's time now for our private matters after all the official ones." Then he kisses me. "Don't worry. No one will disturb us tonight."

I choke a little. “Okay.”

The fleeting twenty years of my life has brought me so much upheaval but to me, his embrace is eternal.

²¹⁶ A traditional unit of weight. 2 *jīn* = 1 kg.

²¹⁷ One reason is because they are using informal pronouns with referring to themselves and each other. A second reason is because Han Xin called Murong Yu by his previous title when he is the emperor, which is a very offensive act.

XLIII: *Unconcluded*

Everything is blurry as the alcohol kicks in. The candlelight becomes a reddish haze.

He throws me onto some soft blankets laid on top of a thick rug. I sink into them very quickly and Murong Yu piles on top of me while his hands work on undressing me. I bite down trying to hold in my moans as I glare at him—he had obviously planned all of this, the feast, the dancers, the exquisite wine, the woods and finally this small tent.

His lips are tightly pursed, appearing a bit frustrated. My clothes are getting more tangled the more he tries and after a moment of thought, he pulls on both side to outright rip it apart.

“No!” I yelp. “What do you want me to wear if you rip it?!”

He leans in. “No one told you to wear so much. You’re just asking for it!”

My clothes are ripped as we trade retorts. The outer robe, the inner layers and then the pants are all yanked off and cast aside. I shiver from the direct contact with cold air. He presses himself on me, kissing my lips roughly like an angry storm. Our naked bodies stick to each other. His knee wedges itself in between my legs out of nowhere and rubs against my groin sometimes lightly and sometimes hard.

“Murong Yu, you’re just like a sick pervert.”

He laughs, a husky sound emitting from his throat. “Not ‘like’. I am.”

“Xin, I just wanna tear you apart and eat you up, not leaving a morsel behind. I’ll hide you in my heart, bury you in my stomach and after you spoil and dissolve, you’ll be with me forever. I really want to...haha. What say you?”

He holds me tight in his strong arms and it’s as if I’m getting squished into pieces by them. I lean back without even knowing as his lips ravage mine and breathing becomes an extremely difficult task. He follows me, looming over me like a mountain. I circle my arms around his neck and do my best to keep my head up and withstand his tongue kiss.

A kiss, a deep one, a kiss that suffocates us, burning away all rationale and bringing only a storm of insanity and lust. Our tongues dance and our lips play together. Our tongue tips hook onto one another and gyrate in each other’s mouth, unwilling to let go.

I can’t lie to myself. My body thirsts for his loving, for his everything.

I struggle to open my eyes against the tide-like lust. Murong Yu's eyes seem to be shrouded by a thin translucent layer of mist and in its depth is a tinge of sorrow mixed with hints of madness that not even the overwhelming lust can hide.

A pang of anguish hits me, stopping even my kiss.

He and I both know what this rendezvous tonight means.

His hand reaches down, pressing my body onto his. A violent shudder runs through me when I feel that hard, burning thing against my stomach. I look up into his eyes and all I can see is lust and desire.

Before I can react, his member heads straight for me, entering painstakingly.

He's moving slower than ever before as if to purposefully extend our lovemaking. The pain makes beads of sweat form on my head and shivers run through me. It's entering almost a fraction at a time and it's larger and hotter than usual.

I can't help but let out a hoarse weeping sound. It hurts. It hurts so much. He's entering me without any foreplay or caressing. I feel a burning sensation in my groins as if I'm being torn apart.

The pain is a dose of medicine that even brings joy in this moment.

Perhaps because the pain in the heart will lessen if the body is in pain?

I hold onto his arms, digging my nails into his skin. He's buried inside me and starts rocking his hips without a pause. I clench my jaw to keep myself from making too much noise. I feel sweat forming on my forehead and dripping down.

I will take whatever he has to give me right now. I am no longer the emperor. I'm just a young man who cannot control himself in the face of his own lust and desire.

It doesn't matter how much it hurts. It's fine as long as I'm with him.

He starts putting more power into his movement. He holds down my hands and uses his agile tongue to play with my chest. Unable to bear it, I pant nonstop and moan as I rise and fall along with him. Satisfied, he smirks and plants kisses on my face, my neck and my chest, and everywhere he goes he lights a fire.

Every time he reaches the innermost spot within me, my body arches up on its own from the dizzying pleasure. That spot continues to get stimulated and the insane pleasure brings spasms that feel like I'm dying and then coming back to life. I can't help but cry, "Ple...please...go slower... ah!"

"I don't care, Xin. I just wanna make you mine."

As his member is moving in and out of me, my moans become louder and quicker. Murong Yu suddenly presses himself on me as though he's mad and starts to kiss, no, gnaw on my neck.

I grit my teeth, trying to withstand his attack that sends a grinding pain out from deep within, but once my mouth opens what comes out in stutters is, "Harder, Yu...I want you...more..."

He latches onto my earlobe and his scorching breaths hit my ear. "Don't you worry, I'm gonna screw you so hard that your knees buckle."

He says as he aims for that one sensitive spot, igniting a rush of euphoria and making me shudder all over. I cling onto him and bite down on his shoulder.

He grunts as he pushes his groins down. I try my best to spread my legs as though inviting him to go in deeper even if it means more pain for me.

I want him. I can't even help myself.

He hasn't relaxed for a single moment as if all of his desires that have been pent up are being released now. I rub myself against his waist, moaning through my clenched teeth, feeling agony but also tenderness.

I think tears are rolling out of my eyes. I can't help but sob with my face in his chest and listen to his quick heartbeat.

The next moment will be the end of the road.

He knows that this is the last time. That's why he's so reckless, right?

This impulse and insanity can be forgiven, right?

The body on top of me is flexible and hot with the temperature of flames. Even the drops of sweat are broiling hot, searing my consciousness when they drip onto me. Our mouths become glued together once again, sucking with the lips, playing with the tongue and biting with the teeth. Soon, I taste rust.

The blood mixes into the tangle. I'm not sure if it's mine or his.

The ecstasy of being consumed by fire is also the ultimate pain.

In this moment, there is no state, there is no land, and there is no war. There are only tender lips, entangled bodies and complete intimacy.

We're so close that we've melted into one, as if we were born this way.

I haven't made love to such an extent for a long time. The strength seeps out of me after the release and I fall limply onto the rug. Everything in my vision is hazy. Even Murong Yu's complexion is unusually blurry.

Our eyes meet and neither of us bears to leave.

We are able to have this night tonight but perhaps we'll be on separate ends of this world tomorrow.

The tears are about to escape their confines. He pulls a bitter smile and licks away my brimming tears. "What're you crying for? Is it because I was so good that you can't handle it?"

I don't know whether to laugh or cry some more so I just scold him, "You bastard. Asshole!"

"You just never say what I wanna hear." He hasn't pulled out yet and rocks his hips spitefully. I gasp for air as a burning pain spreads through me.

He studies me quietly. Our faces are so close that our breaths merge and our lips are almost touching.

In that instant, the anguish comes crashing down and buries me.

I start to pound on his broad shoulders. "Why did I have to meet you, Murong Yu? Nothing good's ever happened to me since I met you. I either get beat up by you or topped by you--"

The rim of his eyes turn red and his lips clip together. He seals his lips on mine and stuffs all my complaints back into my mouth.

My mind goes blank. The tears finally break through the dam. I use all my strength to hug him as if I was drowning and clinging onto the only piece of wood.

“As if anything good has ever happened to me after meeting you. I fall in love with this punk for some goddamn reason and then this punk goes and turns into the emperor of the other country.”

I stay nested in his embrace as I cry quietly, clinging onto his shoulders feebly.

“If only... If I died before meeting you, it wouldn’t hurt this bad now.”

He immediately tightens his arms around me without a sound.

“You think I have it easy?” He closes his eyes and sighs. The sorrow in his voice is painfully obvious. “If I hadn’t let you go and made you stay by my side, or sent you back to Yongjing,” he pauses, “it wouldn’t be like this now.”

“You!”

“Then you’d legitimately be mine and I wouldn’t have to be sneaky just to see you and sleep with you.”

He ducks down and plants a kiss on my forehead before heaving a deep sigh. I take the time to wipe the tears away. I hold him with all my might, not wanting to be apart from him even a fraction of an inch.

Our eyes connect and even time seems to fade into oblivion in this moment. No one says anything to upset the beauty of this moment.

“Yu,” I whisper in a cracked voice, “I love you.”

He cracks a smile of sorrow and touches his chin to my forehead. Our fingers interlock. “I love you, too.”

I struggle to lift myself up and kiss away the tears peeking past the rims of his eyes. They are salty and bitter. I rub my lips together before kissing his lips. There are the remnants of my own tears and the bitterness of it.

And it reaches my heart.

Our mouths are filled with the essence of one another. We gasp for air as the points of connection seem to reach the melting point. I suck up his scent greedily like I can never get enough.

The fires of lust seem to have burned his vocal chords, making his voice even huskier. “Let’s go again, and again and again.”

I don’t know how much time has passed. I don’t know how many positions we’ve been in or how many times he’s taken me. Every part of me, inside and out, has lain wide open for him to see as my body is twisted into all sorts of humiliating positions. But even so, our lovemaking does not show any sign of ending, rather it’s getting more and more intense.

My groin hurts so much that it’s numb. The pleasure is burning strong like a forest fire on a dry summer day. I don’t know how many times I’ve reached the climax; I just know that I’m on the edge of insanity.

Our bodies join and threaten to melt together in the blaze, never to part again, never to be on different ends of the world.

“Ah... Ah! Yu...”

“Uh, uhn...bear with me...”

“Go harder...Yu...I...Ah!”

I want his touch. I want his kiss. I want to be intimate with him. I want to be right next to him, closely, very closely, entangled with him. I want to be devoured by him so that we have nothing separating us. I want to be with him for the rest of my life so no drama, no misunderstandings and no trouble will be between us.

Under wave after wave of pleasure, I can't think of anything else or stand firm on anything else. Who cares about the state or the land? Who cares about status? Who cares about the social norm? Who cares about war and retribution? They can just... They can all just go to hell.



I blink open my eyes to find myself lying on my stomach on the rug with a soft wool blanket on me. He's lying beside me with his arm around my shoulders, deep in sleep.

He's just sleeping there. Those brows that usually look strong and the lips that are usually pressed tightly together are more relaxed now. For some reason, I reach out, wanting to touch his brows but his eyes snap open. Shocked, my hand falls on his neck. He flips over and pushes me under him.

Ripples of desire are apparent in his eyes. I ask quietly, “You can't be thinking of going again.”

He chuckles, “Why not?”

Only the sound of our breathing can be heard in the tent. I hug his neck and stay motionless. A while later, he reaches out and pushes away the loose strands of hair that are wet from sweat.

“Why so reckless?” Even though I know his answer, I still want to ask.

He doesn't look at me but instead at the top of the tent. “Why ask when we both know the answer to that?”

I feel my throat clenching together before he even finishes.

The affair between two emperors, no matter how dear it is to us, can never be recognized.

The darkest of nights are the only times that we can meet.

He doesn't speak and just regards the ceiling. Only after a long, very long time, does he turn to me with something wet in his eyes.

“Honestly, Murong Yu, if you knew it'd be like this today, would you have done what you did? Not killing me, saving me and even letting me go?”

In the silence, I catch the tears glistening in his eyes.

I touch his face with shaking hands but he grabs it.

“What about you? If you knew it'd be like this today, would you have saved me and promised me to help me get the throne?”

I laugh, tasting the bitter tang that seems to spread from my heart to my mouth. Finally, I reply steadily, "I would."

He caresses my cheek. "As would I."

If time were to turn back on itself and let us return to the moment we first met, let us have another chance to choose, I would still take the throne and he would still lay siege to my city without a doubt.

Our present was chosen by us. We can't blame anyone else.

I observe the face mere inches away from my own. His eyes, his hair, his lips; I love every part of him.

He plants a kiss on my lips, a light one, a shivering one, one that lingers on my lips, bringing an overwhelming despair.

This love has always been doomed. Yet, knowing that it's perpetual doom, that it's infinite destruction, the moths still throw themselves into the fire until they meet their very deaths.

If only we could have met in some other way.

He lowers his head, closing his eyes, and touches his nose with mine. His hand gently massages my neck and he says in a wavering voice. "You'd lose consciousness in an instant if I struck right here."

I stop dead in my tracks. I don't understand why he said what he said. He goes on casually with a mysterious glint in his gaze. "If I do that, taking you away amidst the dark of night shouldn't be too hard."

I shudder and even my breath seems to have stopped. I watch him with disbelief. He kisses my lips again, whispering, "Do you believe me, Xin?"

I feel the chills. "You..."

He laughs and takes me into his arms. "I could do it. It all depends on whether I want to or not."

I hold my silence for a bit before sliding my hand away from his neck. "You wouldn't initiate another war. You're not that kind of person."

He lets out a long sigh. "There once was an emperor in Yan who unleashed his wrath for a beauty and destroyed two smaller kingdoms for her. When I read this part when I was young, I burst out laughing, but when I think about it now, he got what he wanted by doing that. He was a happier man than me."

I pull a bitter smile. "What do you want me to do after you take me away? You're the emperor and I can only be the..." The word concubine reaches the tip of my tongue but I stuff it back down. "You really think I'd just let you do what you want with me? And how would I face Xiao—"

His eyes flash dangerously and he covers my mouth. "Don't even try mentioning that little girl right now." My vision has gone fuzzy. I clench my jaw and rest my head on his chest. For a while, no one says a thing and the quietude is almost eerie. The warmth coming from him envelops me, so soothingly and so tenderly.

I think to myself a little bitterly: having an empress and consorts, bearing and raising children to continue the royal lineage, these are things neither of us can escape from.

Murong Yu's hand wanders up to my neck and picks up the white nephrite. He observes it for a while before cracking a grin. "Very good, you still have it on you." I smooch his hand and open my mouth to say something when a thought pops up in my head.

"Let go of me first. I need to look for something," I instruct quietly.

"What?"

I push his arm away without answering and just as I try to move, a dull pain creeps up my waist and even my knees are shaking when I lift my legs. I shoot a dirty look at the culprit and struggle as I crawl out, spread the lump of clothes out and start searching.

"What is it you're looking for?" He props his head up and looks over. "Just wait 'til daybreak if it's nothing urgent."

Slowly, I crawl back into his embrace and he yanks the blanket over to completely cocoon us. I hug his neck. "Don't move," I say as I hang the jade twin *panlong* around his neck and carefully tie a knot.

He looks down and appears puzzled for a split second before realisation hits. "This is the one from before?"

"Even if we..." My eyes start watering as I look at him. "It'll be nice to have something..." I take his fingers and place it by my lips before snuggling into his embrace and hiding my face. He regards me with a thoughtful gaze and takes me into his arms silently.

"Yu."

"Yeah?"

"It's already the middle of the night. If they can't find me..."

The tips of his fingers brush across my forehead and then he pats my lower back. "Don't worry about that stuff. This night belongs to us."

Wordlessly, I nod and intertwine my fingers with his.

This love of ours is just a sinful love that can never be told to the world.

Daybreak means separation; it means farewell for all of eternity.

But at least in this moment, we have each other completely to ourselves. No more misunderstandings. No more guessing.

He holds me tight as if he's afraid that he'll lose me once he lets go. I kiss his cheeks and he purses his lips before sealing our lips together. He enters shakily, and softly and slowly, his aura surrounds me once again.

In that reassuringly warm embrace, I fall into a light slumber. I have another dream. In the dream, my hand is being tightly held by someone's tender hands and the warmth exudes into my very being.

I don't want to move again or open my eyes. I just want to fall asleep and never wake up.



Eventually, the sky lights up. After some sleep, I feel much more energized. The two of us hoist ourselves up, shake out the clumps of fabric and start to put them on the appropriate body. I spot a ring of small teeth marks on his shoulder that is a purplish-blue hue when I'm helping him dress.

Murong Yu turns to me with a half-smile. "It's your masterpiece from last night. There's more." Then he undoes his undershirt and in that moment, I feel all my blood boiling and gushing to my cheeks.

The olive-coloured skin on his shoulders is littered with half-ovals of teeth marks and below those are numerous deep, bloody marks. My cheeks burn furiously and I can't bring myself to keep looking so I hurriedly pull his shirt back and dress him in a rush. He chortles as he teases me, "So you're afraid of this?"

As if his gaze could scorch me, my face along with the rest of my body seems to be ablaze. Embarrassed, I avoid his hand and slip on my outer robe. He hugs me from behind and places his cheek against mine.

"My Xin is so pretty when he's shy," he remarks in a tender tone.

"How inappropriate." Not knowing how to cover up my alarm, I blurt out a random reply.

"Oh my missus, why are you blushing now?" He gazes at me with a smirk. "You're looking prettier by the second from my loving last night."

He just has to bring up what I do not want to hear. Hearing that makes me furious because my lower half is still aching and I have to try very hard to not be obvious when I walk.

He brushes his lips against my neck. "Do you like it, Xin?"

The anguish that had just gone down is rising up again. It's good. It's wonderful. I'll take it even if what he gives me is incredible pain.

"Looking like that...it'd be strange not to fall for you..." he mumbles as he kisses me. "If those eyes of that Duke of Huai Nan were hands, you'd be stark naked on the bed underneath him."

I shudder as my stomach clenches tight. I feel all my blood rushing to the crown of my head but my back feels chillingly cold. He seems to have sensed my stiffness as he straightens himself before turning me around by the shoulder to face him.

He wipes the joking expression off of his face. "Xin, will you betray me if we never see each other again?"

My mouth opens but nothing comes out. I just shake my head.

He squeezes my shoulders. The pain digs deep into my flesh. "You say you love me, Xin, but how much do you really?"

I feel a pang of agony in my heart. I cover the back of his hand and press it tight against the left side of my chest. I smile tenderly at him but the tears won't stop rolling down my face. "As

much as this world is large, as much as nature is beautiful; for the rest of my life, there will only be one in Han Xin's heart."

He stares at me, a bit dumbfounded, and tears seem to shine in his eyes. The next thing I know, I've been pulled into his arms. His arms constrain me by the waist so that I stick tightly to him.

"I searched for more than twenty years for someone who can share my feelings, who can support me and understand me, and vice versa, but right when I've found him, I have to lose him the next second."

A tiny warm thing hits my forehead. It's his tear.

"Why must the Heavens be like this? If we were going to be apart forever, I'd rather that we never met."

I sob in silence as the tears keep flowing.

"I don't care if you're Han Xin or Lin Xin. You must remember that you're mine. Always and forever."

I nod furiously, getting his shirt wet with tears.

"May we meet again in the next life and never be apart."

I take his hand and look into his eyes with tears in mine. "And may we join hands in this life and regard the beauty of this land."

Our foreheads touch. Our breaths join as one. Our tears flow in silence.

Our lips brush together lightly, mixing each other's auras in one, not for lust but for the intimacy of lovers.

After a long, long time, both of us let go at the same time and back away.

I clutch at my chest and crack a smile at him as something seems to be ripped away from the innermost crevice of my heart. The pain is so much that I can't make a single sound.

Every step I take towards the entrance feels like I'm stepping over blades; the pain suffocates me.

Then I hear his voice from behind, each syllable making me tremble. "My friend, let us join hands and haste away²¹⁸..."

The next line... The next line should be "Let us join hands and leave for aye" but he didn't say it.

Murong Yu, are you blaming me, or are you begging or are you merely lamenting?

If I hadn't known you then, you never met me and we never joined hands, we wouldn't have to bear the torture of not being able to be together, right?

But I don't want that. If this was meant to be, even if I had known that it would be like this, I would still want to meet you and get to know you, even if what lies ahead is unpredictable and we end up on different ends of the world.

Murong Yu, even though our farewell is imminent, I, Han Xin, from my heart to my body, will be yours totally.

I love you, Murong Yu, and I will never betray that, with the heaven and the earth as witness and the sun and the moon as proof.



I've made orders to pack the equipment and supplies in anticipation of decamping and returning to the capital. Everybody has been busy moving all sorts of things with a look of excitement.

I'm sitting quietly outside of my tent. The cool breeze blows past, lifting my wide sleeves.

Picking up the *xiao*, I play the *Cries of Soaring Swan Geese* once again. The crisp notes of the *xiao* levitate above the plains like emotional wails.

I'm playing it for *him* and I trust that *he* would understand.

Heng Ziyu is standing ten *zhang* away, looking in this direction. I look down and pretend I don't see.

I'm not sure if he saw my secret rendezvous with Murong Yu. It'd be best if he didn't but it wouldn't matter if he did.

The rulers of Great Rui and Great Yan, I and Murong Yu—officially or personally, he has no right to speak of our affairs. If he wants fame and position, I'll make him a prince²¹⁹; if he wants the company of beauties, I'll give him the most beautiful of them all. I can summon Heng Zixiang into the palace as a consort and bestow upon her glory and love. His family can reach incredible heights and have major success.

This is all I can give you, Heng Ziyu.

But I will never be able to give you what you truly desire. I even have to pretend to not hear, pretend to not see and pretend to not know.

Like I said, 'as much as this world is large, as much as nature is beautiful; for the rest of my life, there will only be one in Han Xin's heart.'



Everything has gone according to plan and everyone has been working like bees. Soon, the day of decamping comes.

The morning wind sweeps over the bare grasslands while the early sun illuminates the earth. The long grasses sway unenthusiastically while the eagle flags of Yan and the war flags of Great Rui flap loudly in the wind.

The thousands of men and horses face each other across a stretch of land. Camp fires burn bright in the empty lot in front of me. The flames jump continuously and the heated air rises, blurring the object behind it.

On the black horse across from me is Murong Yu clad in a black cape embroidered with gold. On the plate on his chest is the head of howling wolf carved in relief. He's looking straight at me with clipped lips and a collected expression.

I jerk my head back and face the sky. A lone swan goose glides past on the far side of the horizon as it lets out a cry. My lips dance upwards in a light smile.

Deep, patterned steps of metal hooves approach me and four heavy cavalrymen shouts, "A farewell for His Majesty!"

Murong Yu spurs his horse over and stops before the fire. As I urge my ride over slowly, I catch a glimpse of a pair of anxious eyes; it's Heng Ziyu.

He and I watch each other on either side of the flames.

"I came to see you off."

"Well, you really didn't need to."

I flash a smile as my grip tightens around the reins. Meanwhile, he stares at me fixedly.

Murong Yu's hand suddenly flies up and a Yan guard walks up holding a tray with two bowls of clear wine. Within the rippling surface are our reflections. Afterwards, another person leads a white horse over and slices its neck, letting the blood drain into the wine.

He picks up a bowl and holds it up to me. I instantly know what he wants to do and I take it from him. His cool fingers faintly brush against mine. I pause as the rites master reads out his passage and I raise the bowl up. I flick a few drops out, up in respect of the Heavens and down in worship of the Earth. After, I tilt my head back and drink it all down.

"If you want, you may leave now." He regards me as he says in a steady voice.

I shake my head. "I still have something."

As I speak, I draw out Ding Guang from my waist. His soldiers immediately unsheathe their arms and several thousand arrows point at me from every direction. The light dancing off of the metal is enough to blind me.

The army falls quiet when Murong Yu raises his hand. "What are you doing?"

I take a deep breath and announce loudly, "Every battle, regardless whose victory it was, leaves behind mountains upon mountains of bones. Today, for the lives of the realm, for the peoples of the land, I shall form an alliance with Your Majesty with **my** own blood to provide the people with peace and safety!"

I press my right hand against the blade and it cuts open my skin, covering my hand with blood.

A spark ignites in his eyes like a droplet disturbing the peace of a secluded lagoon and raising ripples, and chases away the cold.

For a long time there is only the whistling wind.

Murong Yu pulls a smile as he takes out his own sword and slices open his palm in the same manner.

He spurs his steed closer while staring at me and the next thing I know, he's grabbed my hand. Pain spreads from my palm. Our ten fingers entangle with one another and curiously, the wound seems to burn. Our blood mixes together. The red liquid flows out from the spaces between our hands, dripping onto the field, and is quickly absorbed into the soil.

His expression is nonchalant but a sliver of longing flashes in his eyes. "It is said that once an emperor's blood enters the earth, drought will plague the world."

I look down for a second before smiling again. "Then may our blood bring peace to the world!"

He hooks onto my fingers tightly, pressing our palms together. His shoulder quivers slightly.

"Hear mine prayers, the Heavens above! I swear on the blood of two. So long as I live, no soldier of Yan shall invade Great Rui. Were I to break this promise, may I die under a rain of arrows and fall into the pits of Avīci, never to reincarnate."

I, too, cling onto his hand and draw closer to him. "Hear mine prayers, the Earth below! I swear on the blood of two. So long as I live, I shall never set foot upon the land of Yan. My tribute to Yan shall never decrease until the day I die."

We look into each other's eyes and speak as one, "With blood I form a pledge with him today to share happiness and sorrow. Never shall I forsake this. Hear mine true heart, the Gods high and low!"

His gaze penetrates through my eyes like a roaring fire, illuminating everything.

The warmth seeping through my palm seems to be the only temperature I have. My body starts to shake. I just want to burrow into his embrace and never ever leave.

I grit my teeth to stop the stinging in the tip of my nose and force back the tears. How could I possibly lose my composure and how could I possibly depend on him and let myself go so recklessly? Everything and anything was my choice. I have to face the consequences of their results, no matter good or bad.

Our fingertips unintentionally brush together as I pull my hand back and the icy touch makes me shudder. I jerk on the reins to turn the horse around while looking into his eyes.

Murong Yu's mouth slightly hangs open and his bloody hand falters in midair before dropping down. He just gazes at me as if he had a million things to say but no way to say them.

I crack a bitter smile as I feel all my strength being siphoned away, as though I'm going to fall off the horse.

His eyes are burning with tenderness, intense and enigmatic with a bit of melancholy. Our eyes connect and it's as if his can hold within it my entire life's worth of joy and sadness.

Time is like water, Murong Yu. Meeting each other in this world of too much war, too much chaos, was our misfortune, yet the single fortunate thing is that we met each other.

We have never betrayed each other and no matter the challenges or obstacles, we will always be faithful to each other.

It's just that we have to pay the price for it; to be intimate but never close, to be in love but never together.

I bring my right fist into my left hand. I say to him brightly, with a smile despite the unbearable agony. “Goodbye and take care!”

He closes his eyes and slowly a smile surfaces on his face that exemplifies solitude and sorrow.

“Then I wish Your Majesty a safe journey!”

The deep bellow of a horn sounds as the war flags start moving. The soldiers beside me step forth and separate us. The horn roars again, its notes charging into the azure. The Great Rui cavalry moves out slowly, heading southward on their way home.

I hold in the tears, pressing my lips together, and do not look back.

The wind sweeps over the plains, filling the skies with sand.

I squeeze my right hand. The wound on my palm is hurting more and more. The pain seems to go straight to my heart, leaving a scar that will never ever heal.

I place my hand on top of the jade pendant inside my shirt. It almost feels as though it is on fire, burning into my heart.

This time there will be thousands of li between us, so much so that even the winds will have difficulty traversing. I wonder how long it will be before we meet again.

You want to be a heroic ruler who dominates the land; I want to salvage this establishment of my ancestors’.

Destiny is cruel, bringing us within inches of each other and then pulling us apart to different ends of the world.

But there is hope as long as we’re alive.

Let us wait, and wait some more, for that day when we can meet again.

For some reason, I catch the sound of someone singing in the howling wind. It is originally a folk song from the Yan and Rui borders, a song of a young woman longing for her enlisted lover. It is supposed to be a gentle tune but now the melody has power and energy, breaking through the boundless skies, grand and wistful.

“The Heaven and Earth feel my sorrows, they sing for me; my sorrows have no end, ‘tis more than I can bear. But how could I forget you, far as you may be? I think you the same, longing for me as I do you. When we shall meet again I do not know and I cry for this may be our last; return I shall if I am to live and if I am to die I shall think of you for aye.”

²¹⁸ Taken from a poem in the *Classic of Poetry* called 北風 (lit. north wind). The translation was referenced from James Legge’s translation.

²¹⁹ Specifically, a prince who has a different last name than the royal family.

Epilogue

In the latter half of September in the First Year of Yan Xing, the emperor returned to the capital and announced the treaty signed with Yan.

The Yan cavalry retreated three hundred *li* to the opposite side of the Ye River. Five thousand soldiers were stationed on the north shore and a protectorate general was erected.

The two countries, Yan and Rui, made the pledge of upholding the border and not initiating warfare.

What was most surprising was the fact that the two rulers both instituted the border area to be a land for many peoples, moving the large amount of Yan herdsmen who had lost their herd in the war south to the Ye River and the Rui farmers who had lost their farmland and gardens in the war north to the fertile lands, instructing them on farming and how to open up wasteland, constructing cities, inducing commercial growth and allowing the different peoples to intermarry. The northern lands that had once been barren due to warfare gradually began to flourish and change for the better.

The ruler's sword can divide the land and bring upon it endless pandemonium but it cannot separate the common blood that flows through the peoples of the North. The same, sharp sword can also provide a world of peace for the tens of thousands of struggling civilians.

In the years of Yan Xing, one of the most popular stories that was told in the tea houses and bars was the *Blood Pledge of the Two Emperors at Rope Hill Creek*. The storyteller would pull exaggerated faces and speak dramatically as though through his movements the audience could witness the thousands of Blood Mounts charging to their graves, the two armies clashing at sword's point, the two emperors wielding their majestic swords and making a lifelong pledge with their blood.

The children also enjoyed the epic tale. They liked to listen to the two emperors, tall on their horses, looking at each other without a word and swearing to never meet again. One of them turns his steed around with determination and leaves behind him a cloud of dust.

However, this pledge is rather insignificant in the historical records left to the world. The historians were extremely displeased with the cowardly actions of their emperor and with their brushes, easily eluded the pledge that altered the fate of ten million people and the lands of the North. It is noted as such in the *History of Rui: The Basic Annals of Emperor Rui An*: “The twenty-first day of the Ninth Month in the First Year of Yan Xing, He formed a pact with the Emperor of Yan before the two armies. He ceded four hundred *li* of grassland. The Emperor of Yan agreed, withdrew his sword and left northward. Since then, the land north of the river, Ye, has belonged to Yan.”

In the Fifth Month of the Second Year of Yan Xing, the emperor married, bestowing upon the daughter of Shen, a family of academics, the title of Empress; upon the daughter of Gu, a family of nobility in the capital, the title of Consort Shu, for Benignity; and upon the younger sister, Heng, of the Duke of Huai Nan the title of Consort De, for Virtue. Furthermore, the emperor made a special decree against all voices of dissuasion to take the capital’s famous courtesan, Wang, as Consort Yuan, for First.

The romanticism of the emperor became a fairy-tale in the training schools and bordellos. Meanwhile, the Confucian disciples, utterly disgusted and bitter towards this, called the emperor unrestrained and immoral for allowing a lowly woman into the palace as a proper one, taking charge of the inner palace and disrupting order.

In the Sixth Month of the Second Year of Tian De, the Emperor of Yan announced a decree naming the daughter of Xiao, the Duchess of Zhaopeng, the empress, and selecting daughters from each of the four noble families of Yan, Yuwen, Tuoba, Dugu and Helou, and bestowing titles upon them in order to populate the inner palace.

The marriage of the Emperor of Yan was made public and many tribes and smaller kingdoms rushed to Yongjing to present their wedding gifts. When the emperor heard, he was silent in contemplation. After some time, he took out a top quality *xiao* from the Treasure Chamber and handed it to the Ministry of Rites’ diplomat who was headed for Yan. He instructed solemnly, “You must personally deliver this to the hands of Empress Xiao and say, ‘I thank her very much.’”

The diplomat took the instrument and left anxiously.

The emperor stood at Tai Qing Palace, regarding the north in silence. In the end, all that was heard was a faint, nearly inaudible sigh.



Extra:

At Night the Ravens Cry 01

The first rays peeked above the eastern horizon while the light, morning mist enshrouded the capital in a foggy white, seeming somewhat chilly.

Xuan Yang Road, not far from the royal palace, was the place where the nobility and the wealthy gathered. It was lined with tall buildings with exquisitely made rooftops. The most extravagant one of them all was the farthest in, and from afar the golden words “The Manor of the Duke of Huai Nan, built according to His Majesty’s wishes²²⁰” could be seen on the placard above the red gates. The gates of the manor were tightly shut as though the people inside had not yet awoken.

The ink-coloured roof edges carved with mythical creatures seemed to puncture through the clouds, displaying its owner’s elevated and esteemed status.

Every person in the capital knew that the owner of this manor was the only prince without the royal surname since the establishment of Great Rui, the Duke of Huai Nan. What’s more, he was the brother-in-law of the current emperor, the older brother of Consort De, and held an extremely high status.

The red gates swung open with a creak and out walked a few people dressed in servant’s clothing. They began cleaning the steps with sleepy eyes.

Soon, a driver brought a gold-painted carriage to a stop at the front of the manor, and then came the footsteps from inside. “The winds are strong, my Duchess, if You could put on a cape, please.”

The woman who was called duchess climbed onto the carriage, ignoring the maidservant’s words. Soon, the carriage left the manor.

The woman in the carriage had a high, palatial hairdo and wore a pure red *yunjin*²²¹ robe. Her clear, flawless complexion was a rare work of art but faint traces of sorrow hung by her eyes that not even the rouge and flower prints²²² could conceal.

“It’s been so long...yet I still have to beg Brother...” She paused, leaning on the wall of the carriage, as she appeared to shiver. “But I fear him, as does everyone...”

Her eyes shut as two streams of tears flowed down. “The Eldest Princess or the Duchess of Huai Nan...all just pawns of his...”

The maidservant outside the carriage felt a bitter pang when she heard the duchess muttering to herself. As the duchess’ personal servant, she knew that the duchess had no other choice but to

go to the palace. Since the baseless incident twenty years ago, the duchess and duke rarely left the manor and since the empress dowager returned to heaven, they had stopped going to the palace too.

Today, her mistress, the Eldest Princess of Yong Zheng, the Duchess of Huai Nan, was going to the palace for the first time in more than twenty years.

And it was all because the duke's number was up.

Along with the rocking wagon that seemed to rock even the psyche, the Duchess of Huai Nan stared at the flowery patterns on the curtains and fell into a recollection of the past.

She was only eighteen years old that year, the golden age for girls. She should have found a good husband and been married off merrily. However, a war that rocked the entire country made her, one who had always been in the safety of the inner palace, witness to murder and bloodshed for the first time in her life. Everyday, she had to face the fear of death and people died with a horrifying wail. She hid in the palace, afraid that death would fall upon her next.

But she did not die, because a determined man shouldered everything. That man pitched his all and salvaged the country in the end. For the first time at the post-war ceremony, she saw the cousin whom she had never met: the emperor in royal black and the Pearl Crown.

She realised instantaneously that he was the kid once named Han. She also thought that the emperor liked to smile but had to hold it in to put on a stern expression.

Then... Then came her wedding. The emperor married her to that duke who had made incomparable contributions during the war. She was an unworldly beauty and he was a legendary hero; a match made in heaven.

Life after the marriage was civilized and they treated each other with much respect and manner, but something was missing. She could see that her husband was absentminded and sometimes would stare dumbly at her as if he was seeing someone else through her.

She had thought that the days would go on like that, that she would care for her husband and raise his children until old age prevented her from doing so. However, on that day...

Her husband was a powerful official who had a massive amount of control over the military. She was well aware of this and she guessed that perhaps her marriage was naught but a political trade, but she still fell in love with him and hoped to be with him until the end.

When the Yu Lin Guards, under the lead of the Minister of Dalisi, surrounded the manor and took her husband away, she lunged for him, shrieking as if she was mad. The minister could not do anything to the eldest princess but kneel before her and beg her not to do so.

The minister told her clearly: *This is all in accordance to His Majesty's wishes. Someone has said that the Duke of Huai Nan is plotting to overthrow the throne, thus His Majesty gave the order to bring the duke into the palace prison and ask him some questions.*

She wanted to say something in reply but he burst out laughing and gently wiped off her tears for the first time, before pushing her away and leaving with the minister after muttering something.

The manor fell into chaos. She sat, slumped on the ground with her face wet with tears. Only after some time did she realise what her husband said. It was something like: *This day has finally come.*

She staggered as she stood up and asked for a carriage. She was going to go to the palace, to see the emperor. She wanted to see what exactly the issue was.

It was a stormy day with lightning and thunder and rain that fell horizontally. She was already three months into her pregnancy but she knelt there in the rain with her head up, stubbornly, staring at the doors of Tai Qing Palace.

The emperor did not summon her and asked the head eunuch to escort her back to the manor but she said no. She was to kneel there until he came out.

The wind and the rain bit into her like a whip. It hurt at first but eventually she lost all feeling. She pushed on with her will but her body began to cool.

Touching her stomach, she began to laugh; it was a depressing laugh.

A black train entered her vision. Her head snapped up and a pair of dark, bottomless eyes met hers.

The emperor in black, with his hair in a simple knot, turned and spared her only a cold side view of his face. The lightning struck and his handsome complexion appeared to be metallic, void of emotion.

She had heard long before that the emperor was cruel and ruthless in his ways, and seeing him now made her feel cold to the core and even made her think of the giant statue of a god, one carved out of lifeless, Han dynasty jade in the royal temple, calmly overlooking all beings from high up in the sky while holding the ultimate power to decide the fate of all of them.

*Did you think kneeling here would make **me** feel pity for you?*

She choked on her words. That's right. She was just a woman. How could she go against the emperor's almighty power?

Go home.

She shook her head furiously and said in a hoarse voice: *I want to see him.*

He is suspected of treason. The Dalisi minister is currently interrogating him.

No, that's not true! She was almost screaming.

The emperor scoffed: *The affairs of the country are not something a woman like you can handle.*

The emperor straightened his sleeves and she was dragged away by the imperial guards. She thrashed in the rain, watching the emperor getting farther and farther away, and she shouted: *Do You really want Your nephew to be born without a father, Your Majesty?*

The emperor halted and stayed there for a while without moving, save for the slight tremor in his shoulders.

She spoke intermittently through sobs: *The child is innocent. If Your Majesty wants him dead, I am more than willing to give my own life in return for his, but I beseech Your Holy Benevolence to spare the child.*

Through her tears, she saw the emperor leaving in large strides.

Ten days later, he returned to the manor carrying a dejected expression on his sickly pale face. She jumped into his arms, crying: *You're back.*

He did not say a word and only held her tightly, his fingers combing through her thick, long hair. He heaved a deep sigh, showing much fatigue and sorrow.

He was stripped of his military command. His subordinates were either demoted or killed. He was no longer his old self. Battles and glory became a stranger to him ever since.

“M’lady?”

The Duchess of Huai Nan awoke from her recollection only to find herself covered in silent tears.

She took the maidservant’s hand and stepped off the carriage.

The palace seemed to have not changed but at the same time, it had. Ever since the empress dowager passed away more than twenty years ago, she had not stepped into this place.

“His Majesty is reading memorials. If I could ask you to return, m’lady,” the head eunuch said in his screechy voice and bowed to her respectfully with his usual smile.

She chuckled as she looked down in silence at the embroidery of double strings of feathers in gold thread around her cuffs.

It was expected that the emperor refused to see her.

But he could wait no longer. The battles and stress through all those years in addition to the grudge he held worsened his health by the day. Even with the quality medicine from the Imperial Hospital, his condition only became more and more serious. He would lie on his bed dumbly as his consciousness travelled afar. On the occasional brighter days, he would still stare through her at the person she did not know. She did not feel the urge anymore to figure out who that person was. All she could think about was that her husband wanted to see the emperor.

The Duchess of Huai Nan knelt there in silence from early morning to noon, still like a figurine.

She did not understand how that older cousin of hers who had made faces at her and teased her changed so abruptly. It was as if he had been the emperor since birth, cold and heartless, overseeing the mortal land from high above.

She did not understand why her husband was obsessed with seeing the emperor again.

She also did not understand what sort of past her husband had with the emperor to cause a small rumour to become evidence for his crime.

All she knew was that the emperor and the duke had fought side by side during the national crisis and left a worthy tale of a ruler and his subject.



In the stuffy, dark palace hall, the officials were reporting to the emperor in a monotonous voice. The emperor was reclined in his throne, eyes shut, with his head on one hand and the other hand massaging his temple.

The emperor had just turned forty, yet his complexion remained clean and his stature tall, as though the years did not leave many traces on him. This ruler had been a diligent one, almost always personally reading the memorials, but today his head began to ache out of nowhere and caused sharp pain around his temples, preventing him from reading. Therefore, the officials had to read out loud every memorial.

“The Great Chu Yun Dam near Jiang Wu County in the South has been built. The floods that had plagued the lower reaches for many years have almost been fully dealt with and the thousands of farmland are able to be irrigated,” the Deputy Minister of Works said with a memorial in hand. “On account of Your Majesty’s Holy benevolence, it could be said that this feat is an accomplishment of this generation that benefits all of humanity for the generations to come.”

The emperor did not speak for a long time, as if he was asleep. “Enough. How is Sir Song doing?”

A shiver ran through the deputy minister. He quickly bowed down. “Sir Song has finished with the majority of the project. He should return to the capital soon after dealing with the trivial matters of the river.”

“Have the provisions been distributed to the counties that suffered from the floods?”

“Yes, over ten aid and relief offices have been established.”

The emperor lifted his hand and opened his eyes just a crack. “Next.”

The deputy minister approached, holding the memorial and bowing. “Reporting to Your Majesty, the newly enlisted defensive forces have completed their training and can be deployed to the borders at once.”

The emperor replied easily, “Head out immediately along with the supplies and equipment. No delays.”

The deputy minister nodded before the emperor spoke again. “Do not move the cavalry at Ye in the North. They are to remain stationed there and stay on full alert.”

“Your Majesty,” he faltered but he still asked quietly, “The Yan army pushed southwards and conquered the three kingdoms of Tubo²²³, Diannan²²⁴, and Jiaozhi²²⁵. The Yidi²²⁶ tribes surrendered and knelt down as subjects. The situation along the southern borders is tense. Shall we increase our defenses in case the Yan attack?”

Once his words were said, the air in the hall seemed to freeze and uneasiness could be seen on everyone’s faces. The shadows of the disaster that the Yan set upon the lands of Great Rui still lingered and the people who had been through the bloodbath were still anxious.

The emperor did not even bat an eyelash. “Are the advanced troops not in Qianzhou? What is there to worry about?”

“I am just worried...what if...what if?”

The emperor waved his sleeve and dismissed lazily, “No need to worry. Next.”

The deputy minister backed away cautiously and even if his face showed no sign of disagreement, he was still troubled. Though the emperor was paying attention to the news of Yan’s

expansions, he did not seem to be bothered by it as though he was certain that the Yan would never invade Great Rui.

The elderly Auditor Wu stepped forth and bowed to the emperor. “If I may speak, Your Majesty. You have reached the age of forty but have only four sons and three daughters. It would be best to select women both wise and talented to populate the inner palace and the royal family.”

Before his raspy voice stopped, the emperor’s eyes snapped open and a dangerous glint flashed across only to disappear from sight.

“Auditor Wu,” the emperor chuckled but no warmth could be heard. “With so many other national matters, why is it that you only have the eyes for **my** inner palace?”

The auditor straightened himself. “The son of God has no private matters, Your Majesty. Your marrying and begetting a child is to pose a model for the citizens. It symbolises the miracle of birth and is an auspice for the people.”

An attendant sprinted over and whispered in the emperor’s ear. The emperor’s frame shook before he shifted into a taller stance while looking downward. His brows furrowed, losing their usual delicate look, and his tone turned harsh. “Auditor, why don’t you just take a nice trip to the southern borders if you have so much free time on your hands?”

The emperor stood up as he said this and left the kneeling officials behind with a swing of his sleeves.

The officials cowered on the floor, foreheads touching the ground, too scared to even breathe loudly.

They were well aware that the emperor may appear carefree but his mind was extraordinarily sharp and his ways were cruel and harsh. He was like a lazy panther hiding his claws beneath its dark pelt.

Within that pair of sharp, black eyes lied an overpowering source of terror.

The emperor walked into the inner hall, striding past the attendants who were awaiting his arrival up to the bedside. He reached out but did not lift up the veil. Instead, he turned to the palace doctor beside him. “How is the princess?”

“Rest assured, Your Majesty, the eldest princess is fine. She just knelt for too long without ingesting any food thus her body was unable to keep up.”

The emperor dismissed everyone before lifting up the veil and sitting on the edge of the bed.

The duchess was lying quietly in finely made brocade blankets, her slender brows furrowed together and lips tightly pursed while tiny beads of sweat kept collecting on her forehead. The emperor sighed as he carefully wiped it off with a brocade handkerchief.

He shook his head, not understanding why she had to put herself through this.

It seemed that the duchess sensed something as her teeth dug into her lips. Her eyes snapped open to find the emperor watching her in silence with no emotions. She attempted to get up to perform the rituals but he held her down.

“Rest some more, so you don’t faint again.”

The duchess saw the emperor's faint smile. The fearsome aura dissipated in an instant and instead a cozy warmth exuded like the afternoon sun. She squeezed the blankets in her hands, completely caught off guard. She had seen far too much of the emperor's cold heartlessness and heard far too much about the emperor's cruelty and murder to the point this mild-mannered emperor instigated uneasiness in her.

As if he had read her mind, the emperor eased backwards a bit. "What were you dreaming of? I saw you smiling in your dream."

"I..." She felt a pang in her heart that made it difficult to speak, but she bore with it. "I went back to the days of my childhood."

The emperor's smile froze. "Is that so...?"

The duchess nodded and continued softly, "I dreamt that I was flying a kite in the Imperial Garden. The kite got caught on the tree and I, being the dumb me, climbed onto the tree to get it and ended up falling."

The emperor smiled with his eyes cast down. "You were quite naughty back then, a little girl climbing such a tall tree."

The duchess gazed at him and tightened her grasp on the blanket. "That was the first time meeting Your Majesty, right? Who knows what would have happened if You had not passed by and caught me."

"You are right." The emperor looked away and let out a light sigh. "I have almost forgotten. I don't think I was a Lin then."

In the furthest corner of his memories, there might just have been a boy like that, who saw a girl about to fall off a tree and reached out to catch her without a second thought. The two of them ended up tumbling onto the padded grass field, giggling, covered with leaves.

A self-mocking smile danced about his lips. Those things were so far away that he had already forgotten, as though they were memories from a previous life. It was naught but forty years but he was as exhausted as though he had lived through eighty.

"I..." The duchess' eyes lost focus for a second as they meandered about his face. "I'll always remember that nice little boy."

As she said this, she smiled and her face lit up, looking as though time turned back to her early days. "A tiny secret planted itself in my heart. Every day I thought about that boy, wanting to meet him again..." Her words trailed off abruptly. "I had thought that that was love. It wasn't until I met that man that I learnt that childhood friends can never be the same as sworn lovers."

A wisp of melancholy appeared on the emperor's face and the spark in his eyes died.

He understood without a doubt. Childhood friends can share laughter and innocence while sworn lovers never leave, never abandon and are loyal to one another. It could never be the same.

Never leave, never abandon and are loyal to one another.

The emperor flashed a quick, thin smile that faded out of existence like the tiny ripples gliding across the surface of a pond.

"My duchess, you have said all this for *that* issue, right?"

The duchess jerked and sat up with fright and pleas in her eyes. He watched as her face paled and her body trembled like a single piece of dead leaf about to be whipped away by the wind.

He reached for the hair by her ears and pushed it back. "Do not fear, for **I** am your brother no matter what."

The tears finally broke free. The duchess covered her face with her hands as she bawled as though to let everything out. The emperor held her by the shoulders and let out nothing but a long sigh.

"Your Majesty, I'm begging You...please...go see him..." She leaned on his shoulder while her tears flowed out like a river without a dam. "He...doesn't have...much longer."

The emperor did not speak and only held her, letting her tears wet his garments.

After much comforting, she finally began to settle down. She was still shivering and along with her teary eyes, she looked like a frightened fawn, terrified but still pleading.

The emperor did not know what to say.

To go or not to go?

The favours and debts throughout the years and the political and military battles were not something a woman kept in the safe confines of her manor could understand.

In the end, he let her go after patting her back.

"Your health has never been quite good since childbirth, my duchess, and this time you fainted again," he said as he paced to the window. "Stay overnight in the palace and rest well. **I** will find someone to send you back tomorrow."

The hope in the duchess' eyes dwindled and cold began to intrude from her skin, spreading into her heart.

So, the emperor was still the emperor.

He had no heart. He had no love. There was only calculations and power.

She instead began to laugh as she struggled to get out of bed. She bowed to him. "This idiot of a woman has disturbed Your administration, but how could she stand by when her husband's life is at stake? Please pardon my leave, Your Majesty."

Without waiting for his permission, she slipped on her outer robe and walked around the screen decorated with a red phoenix and the morning sun, leaving in grace.

The emperor turned in his spot in front of the window. As the evening sun shone on the side of his face, his expression gradually changed. His eyes became filled with a sorrow so rich it seemed to be indissoluble.

The sun had just been glowing bright but the next moment, the world fell dark as inky clouds rolled in from the horizon, blocking out an entire side of the sky. Immediately after, a downpour ensued. The wild winds swept the plants in the garden up into the air and the large droplets of rain whipped and slapped them.

The emperor stayed there by the windows as his thoughts hovered in the dark.

He knew that the duke must have hated him. When the duke's subordinates had encouraged him to overthrow him, he had been unwilling. That night, however, he came to the palace to see

him. The emperor knew he was trying to test his stance, thus he went along and they spoke about the war and the past. That night of flickering candlelight became their last peaceful and last encounter between ruler and subject.

It was but a way to feign safety and stall him. The corner of the emperor's lips danced up as he recollected.

He obtained concrete evidence and used lightning quick methods to deal with the soldiers who had prompted him to commit treason before giving orders for his capture and interrogation by the Dalisi minister.

But he did not want to kill him, not only because he had contributed to the country and not because of their in-law relationship.

Thus, he let go. On the tenth day that the princess pleaded, he returned to his manor with his authority and army taken away, only to be an idle duke for the rest of his life.

So many people had their eyes on him, in the court and in the army, wanting to hinder him. This was all that the emperor could give him and the most protection he could provide.

Suddenly the emperor cracked a smile amidst his recollection. His brows danced upwards, painting a charismatic picture.

Although you refused this time, who is to say there won't be a second or third time that they persuade you to commit treason? And who is to say you will never do so? Keeping you will always mean trouble.

I won't kill you, Heng Ziyu, for the sake of our partnership during the war and the sake of my princess sister, but I cannot let a tiger keep its claws. Thus, I could only pull out your fangs and rip out your talons so that you may never again stand proud.

²²⁰ It may seem a bit wordy and clumsy in English but in Chinese it only takes six characters. Please forgive me but I really couldn't make the same thing happen with English...^ㄟ

²²¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yunjin>

²²² A part of the regular makeup of women. See pictures below.

²²³ The Chinese dynasty's name for the Tibetan Empire. For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tibetan_Empire

²²⁴ Another name for Yunnan.

²²⁵ The Chinese dynasty's name for Vietnam.

²²⁶ A generic term for any non-Han people.

Extra:

At Night the Ravens Cry 02

The duke's sideburns were dotted with flecks of grey. He lay, curled up with his eyes shut in deep slumber, nestled in a heap of beautiful, cold brocade blankets. A strong smell of herbs mixed with calming aromas filled the room, lingering like thick fog unwilling to disperse.

Every time he breathed and closed his eyes, he could almost see the war smoke, the fire, someone riding a fierce, ink black warhorse with his battle robe dyed with blood and his sword splitting the crimson world.

He began to cough in pain, each time rougher than the last. The duchess had just reached the door when she heard the excruciatingly painful sound. She quickly rushed in.

She helped him up and patted his back for him while he coughed violently for some time before finally coming to a stop. She brought a bowl of medicine over for him to take but he shook his head a little. "Not now. All I can taste in my mouth is medicine."

She could only turn and pass the bowl to the maidservant and then propped the pillow up so the duke could lean against the bed.

The two faced one another in silence. The duke tried to say something but the duchess shook her head gently. He looked down and took her hand. "I'm sorry, Princess."

The duchess' heart was racked with pain but she could only grip her husband's hands tight and fight back her tears.

She saw him lead tens of thousands of cavalry into the capital. She watched as he fought side by side with the emperor. She witnessed his glorious titles and bestowments, and then his bonding with her, his vows before the heaven and earth to never leave or abandon her.

Holding his wife's tender hands, he began to feel dizzy, for many years ago he had held another pair of hands in the same way, but one with calluses in its palms from weapon use. The day he took the Eldest Princess of Yong Zheng's hand in marriage, all he could see was red²²⁷ and it stung his eyes so much that he could not see everybody's faces.

With the emperor as the witness, every official had come to congratulate.

As the elder brother, *he* led the bride onto the red carpet until she stood beside him.

He seemed to have been smiling happily, or maybe *he* had not, or maybe the duke just did not want to see.

That man's smile was never for him.

The duke leaned on his wife's shoulder, listening to her singing the tunes that she had learned in her early days in the palace. Her voice was gentle with a dash of the *Jiangnan* flavour, of the apricot flowers in the spring showers and of the bridges spanning across waterways. For a second, it was as though he returned to Huizhou with the black tiles and white walls, the home in his dreams.

"Ah-Yao..." he unknowingly called the baby name of his sister. The duchess' voice wavered a bit before finally stopping. She cupped his face as she leaned in. "Ah-Yao is doing well. She's been living in Yao Guang Palace. Lin Die's getting big and strong now, just like his uncle."

At last, the duke smiled. Ah-Yao was a simple girl. He could still remember her in her wedding gown, pearl crown and head piece, with her cheeks bright red as she stepped onto her wedding carriage with excitement. There was not one person who had not heard of the emperor's heroic feats and to be able to become his wife was the fantasy of countless girls.

He gave his early years up to warfare in exchange for wealth and power for his family as well as fame for himself, but one wrong step spelled doom for him.

Or perhaps, regardless of the wrong step, his life was destined to be so.

Since the end of the war, the emperor halted labour projects, lessened taxes, aided the refugees in settling, encouraging them to cultivate barren land and to farm, and fought against corruption to strengthen the state. The country improved day by day and the people praised the emperor's name, but no powerful official would remain unscathed under a wise ruler.

At least, he was alive and had the accompaniment of his family.

But he could still remember *his* lost look after *he* shot at the refugees and how *he* shook in the spot. It was in that moment that he saw through *his* facade of cruelty and heartlessness, when he realised *he* was naught but a twenty year old who was forced to shoulder such burdening responsibilities.

Thus, he remained by *his* side and watched the country come back to life from the flames of war, the many industries being revived, the civilian's lives returning to normal and finally, peace.

He knew he had little time left but he still thought wishfully. He wanted to see *him* just once, even if it's just to talk, even briefly, about the old times during the war.

As time passed by, the sky darkened and the rain fell harder. A maidservant burst into the room, angering the duchess.

"What is the meaning of this?" she scolded quietly.

The maidservant knelt on the ground with a fan in hand. "A man came asking to see the duke but wouldn't tell us his name. He just gave us this fan saying the duke would know."

The duke's eyes snapped open. He leaned over and snatched the fan, moving so fast it was over in a bat of an eye.

His hands shook as he opened the fan, and a fiery spark appeared in his eyes in the dark. "Invite him in! Quick!"

The duchess was left puzzled as to why her husband was acting so, until the veil in front of the door was lifted and a man stepped in along with the splish-splash of rainwater. She began to shudder and fell to her knees.

“Your Majesty.”

The emperor, in casual attire, waved his hand to stop her from performing the rituals before letting out a near silent sigh while looking towards the bed.

With the candles burning low, the emperor sat on a chair before the bed. The duchess helped the duke up once more while he stared at the emperor, shaking and mouth opened, but not speaking.

“Duke.” The emperor cleared his throat softly. “How are you feeling?”

But, in all honesty, he did not have to ask to know. The duke’s face was pale and he had a lost expression. The grey in his hair stuck out like a sore thumb and the creases between his brows were larger than usual, making him look all the more senile. All that and the smell of medicine in the room already explained everything.

A look of depression flashed across the duchess’ face. “In reply to Your Majesty, the court doctors said that his lungs are strained from the many years of stress and labour of war and the old injuries from past battles...the condition is dire, they say.”

The duke and the emperor looked at one another without a word as an uncomfortable silence troubled the three.

“You may leave, Qingyi,” the emperor finally spoke. “I have some things to discuss with the duke.”

The duchess looked at the emperor and tightened her arms around her husband, who in turn patted the back of her hand. She remained stiff for a while before leaving quietly.

As the fire crackled, the shadows they casted became so looming it became hard to breathe.

The duke looked steadily at the emperor who had been spared much of the cruelty of time even after two decades. His eyes and his brows were like before except the liveliness and nonchalance was nowhere to be found. All that was left was gloom and desolation.

His pupils were no longer clear as before. Instead, it was replaced by a dark black and chilling coldness.

“Say what it is you wish to say.” The emperor’s tone was flat as can be.

As though it was an illusion, the man who had only just needed help sitting up sat up slowly on his own.

“Your Wise Majesty, I have always been loyal. Never have I planned to usurp Your Holiness.”

He had wanted to say this for quite some time but he never gave him a chance to. He did not want to take regret into the grave with him.

“I know.”

“And never have I plotted to aid my nephew in taking the throne.”

“I know that too.”

“Then...why did You...”

“Just in case.”

The emperor answered quietly. His eyes were dark like the night. The duke stiffened and began to feel cold. It was as though every single move of his was monitored by the emperor and his eyes could almost see through his body and into his soul.

“You have been with **me** from the beginning,” the emperor suddenly spoke again. “You should know how **I** do things.” It was something that seemed to be off topic but the duke understood.

Treason he had indeed considered. His subordinates had urged him and he had been hesitant. If he didn’t overthrow *him*, he could continue to watch *him* but never get *him*. And because of his position, *he* would always be wary of him and might even eliminate him. But if he did, he might lose *him* but that way he would have a chance of making *him* his for good.

And it was just in that moment of hesitation that his fate was turned upside down.

“Your Benevolent Majesty—”

The emperor interrupted him with a wave of his hand. He looked up and his eyes were a bit misty. “That time the Yan army laid siege on the capital, **I** had only just ascended the throne. In order to thwart a formidable enemy, **I** cleansed the palace, purged the court and even shot refugees. **I** have received the title of cruel because of this and it’s not hard to imagine what else they will add onto it centuries from now. But **I** have never regretted it.”

The duke balled his hand, feeling the pain coming from the palms. He spoke cautiously and shakily, “What would You have done if I had not hesitated to overthrow the throne then?”

The emperor quietly studied the man before him. The mighty warrior had turned into a sickly patient. The face that was once full of energy and power was now worn by disease. He cracked a smile. “You would not have made it past the twelve city gates.”

He added after a pause, “And did you truly think all the soldiers who had encouraged you were your men?”

The duke lowered his head as a cold wave of air seemed to exude from the person in front of him and envelop the entire room, making him shiver for no reason.

The emperor played with the fan in his hands with pursed lips. It was bought from a shop on the bank of Lake Yu during their first survey in disguise. He had scanned the array of trinkets and toys and took the one that the duke had picked for him.

Sorrow began to brew in the duke’s heart. The man before him had only wanted to test if he would refuse, hesitate or decide to commit treason, but regardless of which he would have done, the emperor would still find leverage against him. All in all, he was wary of him, as all rulers are since the beginning of time.

Then, he smiled. For the first time in twenty years, he smiled without restraint.

It wasn’t because he was not ruthless or heartless but because this man was his soft spot, a poison that makes him lose himself.

Yet, seeing him, he would willingly fall for it and chase after the poison.

He licked his cracked lips and said with a bit of stubbornness. “If you and I had different identities in a different time, Your Majesty, would we also be different?” He paused before saying, “Maybe we could be...friends?”

The emperor was not angered by the use of 'you and I'. He sat still save for the fingers stroking the ivory fan handle. "Emperors do not have friends but perhaps we could be friends if I were not the emperor. But only friends."

His eyes revealed no secrets. "It is said that the holy mind of the emperor is not easily understood, but after all these years, you have already understood, haven't you?"

The duke was relieved. He realised that the emperor had long known about his feelings. Perhaps it was because of that one kiss on that night ravaged by war and bloodshed or his companionship throughout the years, but that was no longer important. It was one-sided on his behalf from the beginning to the end.

He watched the emperor's back as he got up from his seat, lifting his sleeves and walking towards the door.

"I didn't kill you then, Ziyu, and I won't kill you now." Wind lifted up the emperor's train. His body appeared even skinnier clad in loose clothing. "So just concentrate on getting better."

Just as he was about to step over the doorstep, the duke exclaimed, "Please wait, Your Majesty!"

The emperor turned around to see the weak man getting up shakily, seemingly to step down to the floor. He quickly shot forward and stopped him. "Are you insane? You can't leave the bed in this condition!"

The duke pulled a bitter smile and in the next moment, knelt down on the bed. "I sincerely hope that Your Majesty will not hold a grudge against my wrongdoings after I leave. A sinner's deed has naught to do with his family."

The emperor's hand froze in midair before falling limp and shrinking back into the sleeve. He backed away discreetly.

"Rest assured. Qingyi is **my** sister and Heng Chu is **my** nephew. **I** would not ever mistreat them." The emperor turned once more and scanned the figure kneeling respectfully on the bed, not lingering for one moment.

The duke watched him leave and his hopeful heart froze over. His limbs grew weak and he collapsed on the bed.

The duchess came sprinting in and was scared witless by the sight of her husband coughing so violently blood was gushing out. She bawled as she held him. "What happened, Ziyu? What did you say with His Majesty?"

The duke shook his head and let her wipe the blood from his lips and tuck him back into bed. All of his strength seemed to have been siphoned away and soon he lost consciousness.

The doctor shook his head with a grim expression at the duchess after looking over the duke's pulse. The duchess felt as though she was falling deeper and deeper into a world of ice where it is so cold one cannot behave properly.

"I'm sorry, m'lady...the duke..."



The scholastics were preferred in Great Rui and the gentries only participated in horseback hunting as a social hobby. However, the emperor enjoyed sports and the princes were adept in hunting, thus it became popular amongst the gentries and the civilians.

Every autumn, the emperor would lead officials and the royal family to hunt in the Bei Yuan Summer Palace.

The horns rang and the ceremonial swords were raised. The emperor clad in black robe and silver plates rode forth on a white horse with the eldest and second prince close in toll. In a heartbeat, he nocked his bow and fired. A white bird wailed as it fell from the sky onto the ground in front of the white horse.

The party roared, applauding and cheering. A faint smile appeared on the emperor's face as he tossed the bow to the prince royal.

The senior officials present were thinking to themselves that the prince royal was born to the empress thus he was the heir and the eldest son. He was obedient to his elders, compassionate, smart and hard working, and most importantly of all he was not as bloodthirsty as his father. He was the perfect successor no matter how one looked at it.

The next moment, a soldier came racing in on a horse. He jumped off and said with his hands clasped together. "Reporting to Your Majesty, the news just came that the Duke of Huai Nan had passed away!"

The news was not unlike a thunder clap out of the middle of nowhere. The Duke of Huai Nan had been a taboo topic for twenty years. Everyone held their breaths in anticipation and kept their heads down but a few were glancing at the emperor.

The prince royal tightened his grip on the bow and looked at his father only to see that his expression had not changed one bit. It was the same old, nonchalant face.

The emperor plucked the bowstring. "Continue."

The prince thought for a second that he had been mistaken but he had not been. There was not a hint of sorrow on that handsome face of his father's.

And since then, the entire court knew the emperor's attitude.

The prince rode into the forest after his father. His mind raced as his horse did.

He was never able to see through his father's bottomless eyes to the past buried deep within. He was respectful towards his father but he was also slightly afraid. His father would rarely smile. He displayed nothing but unchallengeable authority to others.

He even felt that his father only had him and his siblings because of responsibility.

The only people to whom his father would smile to were Consort Yuan and her two children, especially that cute, delicate baby princess sister of his. His father would look at her as his most precious treasure. Out of his father's seven children, he would only hold her in his arms.

However, even so, when his father saw the youngest princess being over-bearing and bossy, he slapped her palms hard twenty times. While she wept, his father scolded the seven of them, “My children can be proud but never arrogant!”

The prince sighed. He could never understand his father.



The Seventh Year of Qian Ning, spring²²⁸, the Duke of Huai Nan passed away.

The funeral of the only prince without the royal surname was extremely simple. The Ministry of Rites arranged the service according to the emperor’s wishes and bestowed jade, carts, horses and many other treasures as burial tributes. The emperor did not attend on the day of the funeral, and only sent the prince royal to read the speech, and Consort De and her son.

Not many officials came, perhaps because the world was a cold place or perhaps they were afraid of being associated with disloyalty and angering the holy ruler. Only a few senior, accredited officials and honourable auditors attended. As for the old subordinates of the duke, they had died, been demoted or been exiled. No more than one-tenths remained.

Consort De wept with her red, swollen eyes, and kept wake for the duke with the Duchess of Huai Nan who was clad in white.

The duke was buried in a mausoleum in the southern most edge of the royal burial site.



The night was cool like water. The single light was naught but a tiny dot in the palace hall. The emperor was enshrouded by the darkness while the Duchess of Huai Nan knelt on the freezing, hard tiles. The coldness climbed up her legs and into her very being.

“And for what did you come today?” The emperor spoke casually but what came out could make one shiver.

She lowered her head and held up a letter with both hands. “My husband left this letter before leaving and asked me to give it to Your Majesty with my own two hands.”

“You may do so.”

She bowed down and kowtowed while holding back her tears. “Pardon my leave.”

“Do you hate **me**?” the emperor suddenly asked.

“No.”

She heard the emperor’s laughter, a resonant but chilling sound.

“You all say so. But **I** know. It’s not that you do not hate **me**. You merely do not dare to,” the emperor mumbled. He knew the human mind too well. He knew, too, how to dictate it.

“Are you grieving that **I** never defended him even though **I** knew that he never plotted against the crown?”

The duchess’ face was pale. She bit on her lips and murmured, “He was only fifty.”

The emperor ignored her and, continued, “Did **I** not protect him? If **I** did not care for him, why did **I** give him the noble eldest princess’ hand in marriage? Why did **I** not strip him of his peerage and send him to prison after his plans were spoiled? Why have **I** continued to use his son in court and why have the allowances for your manor never decreased?”

The duchess glared at the emperor with hatred. The holy mind was difficult to predict and his thoughts had always been masked by a thick veil.

Her husband’s death allowed her to see through this veil. Even she, his cousin, was part of his plan.

It’s as though he had no heart and never loved anybody, not even himself. Every person is just his pawn. He could part the seas and shake the earth, do anything in the world, and even calculate the most wonderful thing in the world, love.

She shook uncontrollably, not able to hold back. “Your Majesty? Do You know what it’s like to love a person? Have you ever even loved?”

The emperor stiffened while she raised her head, flashing a bitter smile. She was no longer concerned with disrespecting the crown. “Being a lonely old man doesn’t feel too good, does it, Your Majesty?”

And in that moment, she saw the sadness and pain in the emperor’s eyes, within which had held untold loneliness. His eyes were like the boundless ocean, able to devour everything. However in the next second, she thought she saw wrong. The emperor’s eyes were the same thick black but with hints of mockery.

“You chose inadequate words in your state of mourning, Qingyi, so **I** will not find fault in you.” The emperor cracked a thin smile that seemed to ridicule her. “Love? There is not one person in this world that has the right to point fingers at **me** because of that!”

The emperor heaved a deep sigh as he waved his sleeve. The duchess knew that saying anymore would be pointless so she bowed once more and left after performing the rituals.

The emperor unfolded the letter and read each word carefully.

Dear Your Majesty:

I come from a low background and invested my life, though weak and puny, towards warfare and endured much hardship. However, the most perilous time of my life was not recovering North Dian, nor fighting the pirates in Jin An, nor life in prison, but the days battling side by side with Your Majesty against Great Yan. It is also the times that I miss the most. I do not hate or resent what Your Majesty has done; I do not have any regrets regarding how I feel. I will no longer be able to serve by Your Majesty’s side after I leave, but nonetheless, I wish to be able to meet and know You in the next

life if there is one. My feelings will not change even in the next life. May Your Majesty live as long as the Heavens with the most excellent health.

Your sinful subject, Heng Ziyu.

The emperor let out a light sigh and folded up the letter. He took out the fan and studied it for a long time before finally sticking the letter above the candle. Flames burst into life and lick at the writing, turning them into mere ash drifting through the air.

“In the next life?” He shook his head. “I do not want that. I have already had enough in this life.”

Surely, his sharp eyes caught the hatred in the duchess’ eyes when she turned to leave. It was not only the malice from her husband passing away but it also contained things of a much more taboo nature.

And in the next moment, it was concealed by heavy melancholy.

Women were best if dumb just like the women in his inner palace.

Slowly, he reached up to his neck. He could feel through the fabric the nephrite pendant peacefully hanging around his neck. His life had stopped for twenty years since their farewell and the person that had lived until now was just a ruler who went by the name of Lin Xin.

How could one ask someone who has no heart, no feelings to reciprocate another person’s feelings?

He could just barely recall that there once was a fire that burned in his heart in his younger days but that fire had long been extinguished. He lived for four decades but had only been alive for the first two. The latter two did not seem to belong to him.

For twenty years, he lived in his deserted palace. He was a wise emperor, a ruler in a time of prosperity, who alleviated labour and taxes, who reorganized the court, who empathized with the people and who devoted his entirety to the country, yet who could possibly imagine the pitiful man who would wake from fright in the middle of the night?

He belonged to the realm, to the country, to the royal clan of Lin, to everybody except to himself and that man in the north.

He had aged too. After getting through the countless battles and challenges, he had given his golden years to the endless flow of time. The only time he was truly alive was in the first half.

The fire blinked precariously in the bronze lantern under the blow of the cold wind.

The emperor walked out of the hall and stood at the top of Tai Qing Palace, gazing at the dark skies in the north. A hoarse sigh escaped along with an unbreakable bitterness.

“Yu...”

In this extraordinary and wild life of his, this was a word that he could not ever call out. It could only be heard from his lips in the darkest of night as a silent attempt at self comfort.

²²⁷ Red is the colour of auspice in China. The groom and bride wear red. People cover furniture in red cloth and hang red decoration for weddings.

²²⁸ This may be a mistake.

Extra: For a Chance Meeting

The third lunar month of the Sixth Year of Xian Qing²²⁹. Spring was approaching and the weather was mild. It was the Day of Shang Si²³⁰ according to the lunar calendar.

What should have been brilliant sunshine and lustrous greens²³¹, drinking and playing²³², creative poetry and light talks, was instead a palace enshrouded by deep quietude this year around.

Ominous rumours had spread through the imperial palace. The emperor's headaches had worsened since winter, to the point that he could not think or see straight. One could almost catch a whiff of anxiety in the capital city. Everyone from the elites and nobles to the commoners all held their breaths as they eyed the imperial house.

The imperial physician gave a diagnosis of prolonged stress-induced ailment and strongly recommended holding off the tedious administrative work and focusing on rest. The emperor turned a deaf ear to it and went along with his business unbothered. He had been exposed to harsh conditions in his early years which left his body weakened. He was injured many times later in adulthood but he never paid too much attention to his health and now it has added up in old age.

The stinging headaches were just after-effects.

But the emperor still allowed the crown prince to take the reins on administrative matters in his place. He made visits to the land instead of the emperor. He personally screened talented and able men from all over the country and inspected the lives of the people, winning the praise of the nation. Whether it was amongst the common folk or in the imperial court, all spoke surely of the nineteen-year-old prince's ability to succeed in His Majesty's footsteps and to restore Great Rui's magnificent state.

The emperor was resting at a country residence near the capital, Bath Spring Palace, when this made its way to his ears. An ambiguous smile appeared on his face.

Consort Yuan was right behind the Emperor giving him a gentle massage. She had on a thin chiffon robe, revealing her attractive body. She might have been almost forty but she was still beautiful like a young, thirty-year-old.

Hearing the tranquil trickling of the hot spring and smelling the soothing fragrance in the air actually lightened the Emperor's headache to some extent. He lay on a *ta* with his eyes closed and a light grin. Little flower petals floated on the water and steam from the spring drove their delightful scents up into the air. It was a place you would not want to leave once you were in.

The Emperor felt he truly was getting old. The nonchalance in his youth could have been a facade but the fatigue after his thirties could not be concealed.

He grabbed onto Consort Yuan's delicate arm and peered at her. "I hear birds chirping, Wang Shu. What kind of bird is it?"

She paused before answering with a smile. "It's the swallows, Your Majesty, returning from the south."

"So, the swallows have begun to migrate north again, huh." A pause. "Wang Shu, it's April, right?"

"Not yet. It'll only be Shang Si in a few days."

"The Day of Shang Si. Right, I remember now. How troublesome."

"Then get someone to go in Your place if it's troublesome."

"I do want to but I'm afraid they will start to say that I've got one foot in the grave if I do." Consort Yuan's hand shook. "Your Majesty..."

The Emperor turned his gaze out the window and took Consort Yuan's hand, as if about to speak but he only sighed in the end.

She observed his seemingly empty eyes and started feeling uneasy. She had understood since the day she married him that he was no longer that playboy that hustled through the city streets. He had completely become an emperor who held the rights to life itself in his hands.

It seemed, however, that she was special to him in the imperial palace. Her position was only lower than the empress. She had a son and a daughter and unrivaled love from the Emperor. She was a smart woman. She knew her background was too low and she didn't have a powerful family to support her. She could only depend on him and his love.

"Where is Huan-er²³³? Did she not accompany you here?"

Consort Yuan forced a smile and fixed the emperor's robe back onto his shoulders. "Huan-er insisted on going to the south with the crown prince. It was You who granted it."

The Emperor chuckled as he rubbed his temples. His mind had certainly become foggy. Lin Huan was his youngest and most beloved daughter. The young princess was zealous just like the emperor in his early years, playing, having fun and being silly all day long.

The consort laughed along. As a mother, she obviously wished for her daughter to be wise and gentle. Amongst his seven children, the emperor was excessively strict to the crown prince and quite tough to the rest of the princes and princesses, but his doting for the youngest princess knew no boundaries.

"Your Majesty," sensing his good mood, she softly said what she had been brooding over. "It would be unwise to continue pampering Huan-er like this. She's fourteen, almost the age of hair-pinning²³⁴. What would become of her if she's allowed such reckless behaviour?"

She spotted the Emperor's frown before she even finished so she couldn't do anything but stop.

He let go of her hand and spoke lowly. "To be able to live without worry in the royal house is a luxury in and of itself. I hope that Huan-er can be an exception to that, to not live in the shadows of her background."

The consort suddenly felt bitter gratefulness. Her eyes turned red as she bit her lips.
Surely, she had realised that the freedom he had been trying to provide for Huan-*er* was naught but what he wanted but could not have himself.

The room fell quiet save for the splashes of water.

“Wang Shu.”

Trickle.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You once sang a song for **me**. What was it again? For something?”

“For Nameless²³⁵.”

Splish-splish.

“That’s right. **I** wish to hear it. Sing it once more for **me**.”

The consort nodded lightly and pressed her lips together before singing. Years had passed but her voice was still warm and bright like a youth.

“Green were the ripples of Qi²³⁶. Alone you had always wept
O how I worried for you, so I gifted you the wind
Please be with me, until the earth ages, the sky crumbles and our hair whitens
The winds never rested, blowing away my troubles
I heard stories of the past, as my memories flew off to the distance
I shall cherish the person before me this moment, and never let go...
...Bitter shadows of the north winds, spoke of sorrow and woe
Hand in hand, we’ll age together, and together in life and death we shall be
Millenniums have elapsed when it all dissipates, and I wake, wistful.

The Emperor had picked up a letter from the stand beside him some time during the song and began reading it. He never got tired of it no matter how many times he had read it. Since ascending the throne, that man’s forceful ways had never changed, charging out to battle and leading attacks, but his temper had been refined. The letter inquired about his illness and urged him with gentle words. Despite being an official message between countries, the contents sounded more like greetings between lovers.

As soon as the word of his illness got out, the Yan emperor sent out this letter along with his messengers as well as rare medicines from Yan. Despite the distance, the message arrived in less than two fortnights.

With a thin smile, the emperor didn’t show much emotion but the hot spring water seemed to flow through his heart, softening and warming the bitterness within.

It’s been twenty years, he thought to himself. He had become old and he as well, but the love between them only became richer with time like wine.

Is it fortune or misfortune? He asked himself.

The emperor shook his head. He couldn't be sure, perhaps just like the beginning of this love. Neither of them could explain when the seed pushed through the soil and how it grew to be a towering tree.

Perhaps it was just fate, just like their meeting.

The consort heard a long sigh from the emperor. His murmurs sounded like repetitions of the lyrics she had just sung.

"Please be with me, until the earth ages, the sky crumbles and our hair whitens; The winds never rested, blowing away my troubles..."



Shadows danced with the candlelight inside Feng Yi Palace as a cool breeze blew through. The emperor and empress sat at the forefront while the other consorts sat on the two sides according to rank.

In the eyes of a commoner, the handsome, lively emperor and the proper, elegant empress were the father and mother of the entire country. The emperor protected the country from powerful enemies, actively participated in governing the country, encouraged a lawful society and served the people. He was the wisest and most generous ruler they had seen.

The only thing that worried them was the fact that the emperor did not take a great liking to women. He had few concubines and only seven children, far too few.

The empress turned to the emperor beside her and spoke from her rouge lips. "I have summoned all the consorts who have bore children, Your Majesty."

The emperor opened his eyes a crack and scanned the women before him. He had very little concubines and if it was concubines who had children, there were only four: the empress, Consort Yuan, Consort De and Consort Shu. The other titleless concubines had served the emperor in bed but none gave birth.

He knew very well that the country would only suffer were there too many princes and they fought for the throne.

Consort Shu, Consort De and Consort Yuan were all anxious and the empress watched the emperor steadily too, not knowing what he had in plan.

The emperor picked up a yellow scroll from the table and explained, "This is an official document from Yan delivered just two days ago, requesting **my** princess' hand in marriage for the crown prince."

The empress' hand trembled unknowingly and she took a glimpse. What her eyes caught were the words: Once marriage bonds are formed, our states will have secured peace and put a stop to all war for the days to come.

"Did You grant it?" She felt uneasy.

The emperor folded the scroll back and replied casually, “A marriage between two countries is a deed that will benefit the people. **I** have already granted it.”

At once, Consort De felt her anxiety disappearing with a poof. She only bore one son, Lin Die, in her twenty something years in the palace. Anything to do with a princess had nothing to do with her. With that in mind, she looked up at the empress and the other two consorts with daughters.

After much deliberation, Consort Shu looked up to find the emperor sporting a normal expression, so she probed, “Which princess was Your Majesty thinking of marrying to the Crown Prince of Yan?”

The empress stayed quiet. The emperor had three daughters, born from her, Consort Yuan and Consort Shu. She was not sure which he planned to marry off. According to stories, the people of Yan had always been wild and strong, even the civilians were fierce like beasts. The pampered princess would surely experience much hardship being married to that faraway place.

“Lin Huan, the Princess of Chang Ning has not pinned her hair yet, so she will not be considered. There are currently two who have reached adulthood, Yan Xi and Yi Ran.” The emperor glanced over to the women beside him. “Choose one to be married to Great Yan.”

Consort Shu dropped her gaze in a moment of dumbfoundedness but she looked back up. “Your Majesty, the Princess of Chang Ning can perform the coming-of-age ceremony once she returns to the capital. Plus, You have always warned those of us in the inner palace against acting on personal grounds.”

The emperor flashed a tiny smile. “Lin Huan still has a year before pinning her hair. **I** cannot send a child to another country no matter how much **I** want to please the Yan emperor, can **I**?”

His words sounded good and proper but it was blatant that the emperor was biased and protective of Consort Yuan.

Consort Yuan clenched her teeth to hold back her tears. Her hands clutched tightly at the handkerchief.

She remembered that the emperor said to her when he took her into the palace as his concubine: ***I will protect you from now on so you won't be bullied because of your low background and so that your children live a good life.***

The empress and Consort Shu stared at the emperor, not able to get a single word out of their mouths.

The emperor grabbed a cup into his hand and took a sip. “The crown prince is twenty one this year. Yan Xi is eighteen and Yi Ran is seventeen. They are all close in age.”

Consort Shu slowly lifted her gaze. “Our princesses couldn't possibly stand living in that country.”

The emperor replaced his tea cup. His eyes were calm. “This involves the lives of millions of people. It is not something that their tempers can decide.”

Faint rays of sunlight were poking through the hall, forming shadows on the tiles. Miniscule particles of dust floated in the air and time seemed to come to a standstill.

The emperor leaned back on the chair with his eyes lidded. His fingers tapped lightly on the table. Each tap seemed to knock on the empress and consorts' chests. They could feel the overwhelming force exuding from him like a thunder cloud suffocating anyone it looms over. They know that once married to that place of deserts and ice, beyond thousands of *li* of land, they would never meet again. However, with the emperor's grant of a marriage bond, there was no other way.

Then the emperor spoke lazily, "Being supported by the people, one must attempt to repay them. As a member of the royal family, one must be conscious of her duties to the country."

The empress frowned and sighed at his words and hints of apprehension appeared on her face.

Suddenly, after a long period of silence, the sound of clinking jewelry and shuffling clothes could be heard. The empress stood, clad in her regalia, and bowed down to the emperor.

"On behalf of my daughter, the Princess of Yan Xi, I would like to volunteer to be married to Great Yan in order to form eternal bonds for the two countries."

Slowly, the emperor opened his eyes to see the empress kneeling before him, head bowed low, and did not show much surprise. He sat up straight with a smile. "You are the mother of this country after all, Zitong, and know your duties to the country."

With bitter desolation brewing in her heart, the empress pressed her lips together and pulled a smile when she looked up.

The next day, the holy edict was released that the Princess of Yan Xi volunteered to be married to Great Yan to tie the two countries together with marriage.

For three consecutive days, the dowry that the emperor bestowed upon the princess flowed endlessly into Feng Yi Palace.

Wedding gown, wedding crown, head piece, and an array of glittering jewels and stones...

The princess sat before the mirror with a light smile. The woman in the reflection had willowy brows and thin lips and light danced off her eyes, making her appearance striking and outstanding. The empress was behind her as well, gazing at her daughter.

"Don't blame your father, Wei-er."

The princess did not reply but only lowered her head as she played with a hairpin embedded with a thousand-year-old black pearl. The princess' eyes, face structure and expressions looked after her father. One could see from her eyes a bold aura that an average woman would not have.

"What do you mean, Mother? Father has done no wrong."

She said with a smile and stuck the hairpin into her hair. She watched her own calm, elegant smile in the mirror.

"Father never feared the Yan and I am Father's daughter. I have naught to fear."

The emperor entered wearing a simple black robe and stopped behind the princess. "Well said. A daughter of Lin fears naught."

The princess did not rise to perform the rituals but only turned her head a little. "How did Father get the time to come visit Mother and me today?"

The emperor reached out to catch her small shoulders and bring her into his arms.

The princess closed her eyes and trembled. She heard him say, "Sorry, Wei-er."

“Father is sorry, Wei-er.” Her father’s voice sounded so pained. “Once upon a time **I** sacrificed **my** everything to protect this country but **I** did not think **I** would have to sacrifice **my** own daughter too.”

“The Yan emperor and empress are both old friends of **mine**. They will treat you well.”

In this moment, the mighty emperor was only a sorrowful, helpless father.

The princess pulled a smile but all she could taste in her mouth was a bitterness that reached her heart.

Father hugging her like this was something she had never even dreamed of in her eighteen years of life.

He was a ruler first and a father second.

The Fourth Month of the Sixth Year of Xian Qing, the Princess of Yan Xi was married off to Yan. The emperor personally brought the princess to the frontiers, leaving the Crown Prince to govern the country.

A grand ceremony took place on the day the princess’ wedding carriage left the capital. The bright red emblem of the royal house billowed in the wind, appearing as a ball of flames. The rows of imperial guards held up their spears decorated with red tassels and their horses’ stomped hard on the road.

The River Ye had become a gathering spot for merchants of the two countries since the treaty signed in the First Year of Yan Xing. The areas to its north and south became grounds of commercial import. To the north one could reach Yongjing, to the south, South Hill and to the west the Western Region²³⁷. Tea, horses, china, leather, exotic women, wine, products of all of the land surged in across the borders unobstructed. The peoples gathered and settled together, intermarrying, creating a common bloodline and culture to form one harmonious group.

The north shore of the river was littered with blood red feathers and tassels flashing under the light, rivaling even the sun itself. The Yan emperor had already been waiting with the crown prince in tow for the bride.

It was the Rui customs for the father to bring his daughter to the groom but because of that oath so many years ago, he cannot set foot on Yan land. He could only watch as the second prince brought the princess to the other side.

The emperor squinted and spotted his daughter standing beside a tall, young man amidst the crowd, and behind him, seemed to be his father. That man was looking this way too and when their eyes met over the river, they could almost see into each other’s souls.

The emperor smiled. It was a smile of fulfillment. He felt satisfied with just this one look.



With the celebratory music blasting, the emperor's headaches were coming back again. He propped up his head and slouched against the seat, resting with his brows tightly furrowed.

He had no idea when the wedding banquet ended. When his head cleared, he was already sitting alone with the Yan emperor in the glamorous tent with a table between them. A soothing incense burned in the censer and the tea leaves picked before the rain season released a fresh scent.

The Yan emperor was far away, sitting tall and proper, with a calm expression that contained none of the fierceness from before. He was holding a cup with two hands while looking in this direction.

It's been more than twenty years.

He had thought time would wash it all away and let everything be gone with the wind. However, things turned out the exact opposite. The longing did not fade and instead turned into something like wine, the longer it remained sealed up the more its fragrance will fill every corner of the world once opened.

It was just that anything, with the passing of time, becomes hard to voice, the words getting stuck at the tip of the tongue.

The emperor was beginning to feel uncomfortable under his gaze. He cleared his throat. "Your Majesty?"

The Yan emperor cracked a smile but did not speak. He was a bit puzzled as the Yan emperor got up and slowly approached him. As though mesmerized, he stood and faced him quietly.

"You're still so awkward." He reached out and pulled him into his arms, tightly securing him.

As a familiar scent hit his nose, he hugged him back and did not make another sound. He was already lost in reminiscence. This was an embrace that he had longed for twenty years.

The Yan emperor sat him in his lap and took him into his embrace once more, placing his lips against his lightly.

"You shouldn't have made that silly promise back then to never step on Yan territory. You're still here on my lap, aren't you?"

The emperor chuckled and rested against his shoulders. "And my daughter has become tribute as well."

The arms around his waist suddenly tightened, locking him in his arms near the point of suffocation. The Yan emperor's Adam's apple bobbed as he pressed their foreheads together without a word.

The emperor did not speak either and just leaned on him. No words were sufficient to describe this moment.

He looked down at him, at the face that had become thinner and the eyes that were still determined as before.

"So we meet again, Xin," he said hoarsely after studying him for some time.

"After twenty years."

"But it's not too late."

"What are you looking at?"

“I just wanna take a good look at you. I haven’t seen you for so long I almost forgot what you look like.”

The emperor reached up to the Yan emperor’s forehead and used his fingertips to smooth out the creases between his brows. “Me too.”

The emperor rested on the other man’s chest and, as though having recovered his livelihood, began to talk about his choices, his softness, his resolute, his ruthlessness and his yearning. The man listened quietly while caressing his hands. He could sense that the man in his arms had not changed. Despite being the praised and honoured ruler of a peaceful era, he was just as lonely as always. He was still that young man he met on the desert who did not like to speak his mind.

He was the same too. Despite being the almighty persona that the officials and the people obey wholly, he still felt that no one could understand him and that he lived alone in his palace.

The rulers owned the realm and reigned above all but the one thing that tailed behind them from beginning to end was loneliness.

He pulled open his collar and planted his lips on his skin, sucking gently. Their breaths intertwined and all they could see in their eyes were each other, nothing else. They were both waiting for this moment of reunion even though this moment came too late.



☪ Summer left and winter came; winter left and spring came back.

News came from Yan that the crown princess bore a son after ten months of pregnancy. Delighted, the Yan emperor picked the name Murong Xun for his grandson and adored him very much.

When the emperor knew about this he was already lying on bed, ill.

The messenger delivered the gifts for his daughter and grandson which included a solid silver longevity lock with floral designs carved in relief. He hoped that this child would bring a longer period of peace for the two countries.

The emperor was lying underneath two layers of blankets in the gloomy hall. His eyes were open and the bright, clear pupils seemed to be dimming day by day to an aged grey. He clung onto the hand of the woman sitting by the bed in silence for a long time.

“Wang Shu, are those the swallows?”

“Yes. It’s spring.”

“Why is it so quiet in here?”

“I made everyone leave. I’ll stay with You.”

“Why don’t you get some rest, Wang Shu?”

After some time, “I’m not tired.”

Consort Yuan's hands were being tightly held by the emperor, his fingers hooked onto hers. She probably knew that the emperor was afraid of her leaving and lying here alone, so he just wanted to hold onto something in order to feel safe.

The emperor listened to the bird's cries as they flew across the sky and a smile that the consort could not understand formed on his lips. He did not have anything to be happy about. He just knew that spring was here.

"Wang Shu, do you remember that spring when **I** took you kite-flying out in the country?"

"I do. I hadn't come to the palace yet at that time."

"You liked growing orchids then. Do you still grow them?"

"Yeah, the garden outside Zhao Yang Hall is full of them."

"Has Lin Hong been on his schoolwork?"

"Hong-*er* likes school. Did Your Majesty forget?"

The emperor mumbled, "Forget? Yeah, **I** forgot." Then his head fell limp to one side and his vision blurred. All that was left was the sharp cries of birds in his ears that reached the sky.

He dreamed of his father's warhorse and his mother's regalia, of the manor he once lived in that was now in ruins, of the ascension ceremony that took place at the majestic Tai Qing Hall, of the pools of blood seen from the city walls, of the black cavalry that was everywhere the eye could see, of the grand wedding, and of the countless faces that flitted across his vision, some mad, some smiling.

The emperor seemed to have realised something and he pulled a weak smile.

That night, he summoned the crown prince who knelt in plain clothes by the bed watching his father. Father was forty-five already, the age that signalled old age, but Father seemed to age faster than anyone.

"**I** must warn you not to use military forces against Yan no matter what. Never attempt to take back the four hundred *li* of land with the army. Your sister will be the empress of Yan and your nephew may be the next emperor of Yan. These are all opportunities **I** am leaving you with."

"**I** am leaving you a harmonious realm. Guard it carefully. Protect it with everything you have got."

"You must be a wise ruler and you must know rulers do not have love for himself. He must sacrifice his everything for the country."

"Remember, **my** son, what an emperor must do is a hundred times more difficult than what the rest of the world sees."

The crown prince bowed down respectfully, touching his forehead to the ground.



The Eight Year of Xian Qing, the emperor returned to heaven at the age of forty and five. His posthumous title was An²³⁸.

With regards to this ruler that reigned Great Rui for twenty-four years, the remarks after his death were not outstanding.

He inherited the vast piece of land and its millions of citizens from his predecessor, fought off a formidable enemy, the Yan cavalry invading southward. He guarded the capital at a time of peril and forced the Emperor Wu Lie of Yan, who at the time was still a prince, to retreat. However, he did not go on the offense and instead ended the war and formed a treaty with the Emperor Wu Lie of Yan.

He purged the court and palace during the war and killed or imprisoned many influential officials, even shooting at refugees. After the war, he cleaned out corruption, focused on helping the lower ranks of society instead of the higher. Many elite families met their ends overnight. He also threatened subjects who had made great contributions to the country, ruining the backbones of the state. All of this made his name associated with cruelty and violence.

His actions disappointed the people who had hopes for a comeback for Great Rui. He did not conquer the barbarians nor did he recover Great Rui's former name. He was more like a lazy, laissez-fair person who did not expand the territory, who did not make a name for himself, and who did not accomplish much in any area. Throughout his life, he only did two things: truly let the poor live a decent and peaceful life and strip the gentries of their power

His name was not noticeable in the history of Great Rui. The historians seemed to be especially stingy with their ink when it came to him, not willing to write much about his life. His name was not striking amongst the glorious titles of his ancestors. His stories faded from the mouths of the exaggerating storytellers. His heroic feats of protecting the capital seemed to be forgotten on purpose by the people. The Rui citizens did not despise him nor miss him.

His memorial tablet was placed in a dark corner in the temple, in front of which quietly burned thin, long sticks of incense. The portrait of his handsome face slowly turned to dust.

The Yan emperor was playing with his grandson who was babbling when the news arrived in Yongjing. The attendant held the scroll in his hands, awaiting the emperor's orders.

The Yan emperor's hand trembled. "When was this?"

"In reply to Your Majesty, it was the ninth day of last month."

"How was it?"

"He seemed to have left very peacefully."

The Yan emperor lowered his head. The attendant could not see his expression, only what might have been shaking shoulders and a hand pressed on his neck.

After a while, the emperor finally calmed down. "Let the Ministry of Rites deal with this."

The nervous attendant left in a hurry. The toddler clapped his hands together, giggling as he lunged for the kite in the sky. The Yan emperor's eyes became wet as he looked at his grandson.

The toddler was looking more and more like his other grandfather. A handsome face with a rebellious touch in his eyes, the toddler looked just like his grandfather when he smiled.

Their blood finally merged into one.

The Yan emperor stood in the spot, hand frozen in midair while he dumbly watched the child wobbling around. The toddler was calling him but his eyes were cast off to the distance, beyond the palace walls, beyond the desert, beyond the clouds drifting across the horizon, in hopes to fly to where that man was.

“Grandpa, Grandpa.” The child came up to him, rubbing against his legs while reaching up for his hand.

The Yan emperor’s mind came back at last and brought the little guy up on his lap.

The toddler stared at the emperor for some time before pouting his lips and touching his grandfather’s eyes with his own chubby fingers. “You’re crying, Grandpa.”

The emperor’s face was right under the sun. It was pale and there were something wet under his eyes. He opened his mouth to call his name but the word got stuck in his mouth.

He murmured. “Grandpa’s not crying. It’s just sand...sand in my eyes...”

The imperial palace was blocked off with brocade and silk curtains and covered with a healthy layer of greenery—where could the sand have come from?

The child hugged his grandfather’s neck and giggled with a pure, brilliant smile.

Soon, the news travelled into the inner palace. The empress dismissed the servants and jumped on the bed before sobbing with her mouth covered.

Several decades in the palace had changed her from an arrogant, innocent girl to a mature empress. Tears and smiles were a stranger to her.

But he had left. She couldn’t help but cry.

She could still remember that night of peril when he held her tight and took her out of danger’s reach. She lied against his chest that seemed to separate her from all sources of fear.

He took her *xiao* and left for the unknown, never to be heard again.

At her wedding, he sent a *xiao* with the messenger. It was only then that she knew he had become the emperor of that country in the south, a person who held the rights to life and death in his hands.

She used to call him “*ge*,” but this name had long dissipated in the winds of the desert.



The River Ye ran endlessly—*splish splash splish splash*—as if it had been so since the dawn of time.

With no ceremonial decorations or guards, a single carriage rolled through the morning fog and came to a stop at the north shore.

The Yan emperor and empress stepped off the cart and then took the child off as well. A chilling autumn breeze blew past bringing along a dusty yellow storm. The empress quickly wrapped the child in her cape and hurried after the emperor.

The emperor was strolling over a dead field of grass. The thin blades shook in the wind. Nothing about the river seemed to have changed.

Twenty years of longing had brought a rushed encounter, but after the warmth what awaited them was an eternal farewell.

He looked up at the azure sky. A gloom appeared in the far horizon, a steel grey cloud hovering over from the north slowly covering the entire sky. A row of swan geese soared across the sky towards the distant south.

He sighed. "How cold."

The toddler studied the plains before him with wide, curious eyes. Hugging the empress' neck, he asked excitedly, "Where is this?"

The empress flashed a graceful smile. "This is the borders."

The child pointed to the south. "And where is that?"

"That..."

"That is your other grandfather's country."

The emperor answered calmly before taking the child from the empress. He pointed to the mile after mile of land.

"My other grandfather?" The child asked with his head tilted.

"Yes." The emperor's eyes were so dark that they seemed to merge into this duststorm. "Remember your grandfather. He was a hero. He loved his citizens."

The empress stood beside the emperor with a melancholy heart. "He...he has..." she mumbled.

The emperor forced a smile. "He pursued freedom yet he was imprisoned in the grand palace of the royal family. And now he has to be buried in the royal tomb. It's so cold and dark. He wouldn't like it there...never..."

The wind whistled past, whisking their capes into the air.

"The sky is still the same, the water is still the same, but on this desert and under this horizon, there are no more of that person."

Once upon a time, someone loved and someone waited, but none can escape the wheels of fate.

The Sixth Year of Chong Guang of Great Yan, the Yan emperor returned to heaven at the age of sixty.

They met and they loved. They left one another and they watched one another from afar. They have both departed this world and no battle or war will separate them, and no duty or ambition will force them to make any decisions. The world have become nothing but passing clouds and flowing water to them, something they will not spare a glance at.

From now on, there will be no wars, no arguments, no loneliness, no farewells, no separation. There will only be an eternity that belongs to them.



²²⁹ 顯慶, literally “evincing prosperity.”

²³⁰ The third day of the third lunar month.

²³¹ This Chinese phrase literally means ‘flying red, dripping emerald’ (飛紅滴翠) and is taken from the title of a piece of writing called 《飛紅滴翠記黃山》, or ‘Memoirs of Huangshan’s Sun and Trees,’ where it is made clear that ‘flying red’ refers to the sun traveling across the sky and that ‘dripping emerald’ refers to the greenery on the mountains.

²³² There was an ancient tradition to bathe on the Day of Shang Si to wash away misfortunes. Ancient Chinese people bathed, went flower-picking, drank wine and participated in other activities on this day.

²³³ This is a suffix added to names of children.

²³⁴ Girls had to pin up their hair with hairpins at the age of fifteen.

²³⁵ Full translation below.

²³⁶ A river in Northern China that is a tributary of the Wei River. It was a place of early civilization and is arguably the most praised in literature and most historically important river next to the Yellow River and Yangtze in China.

²³⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Regions

²³⁸ 安 (an1), literally “peaceful.”